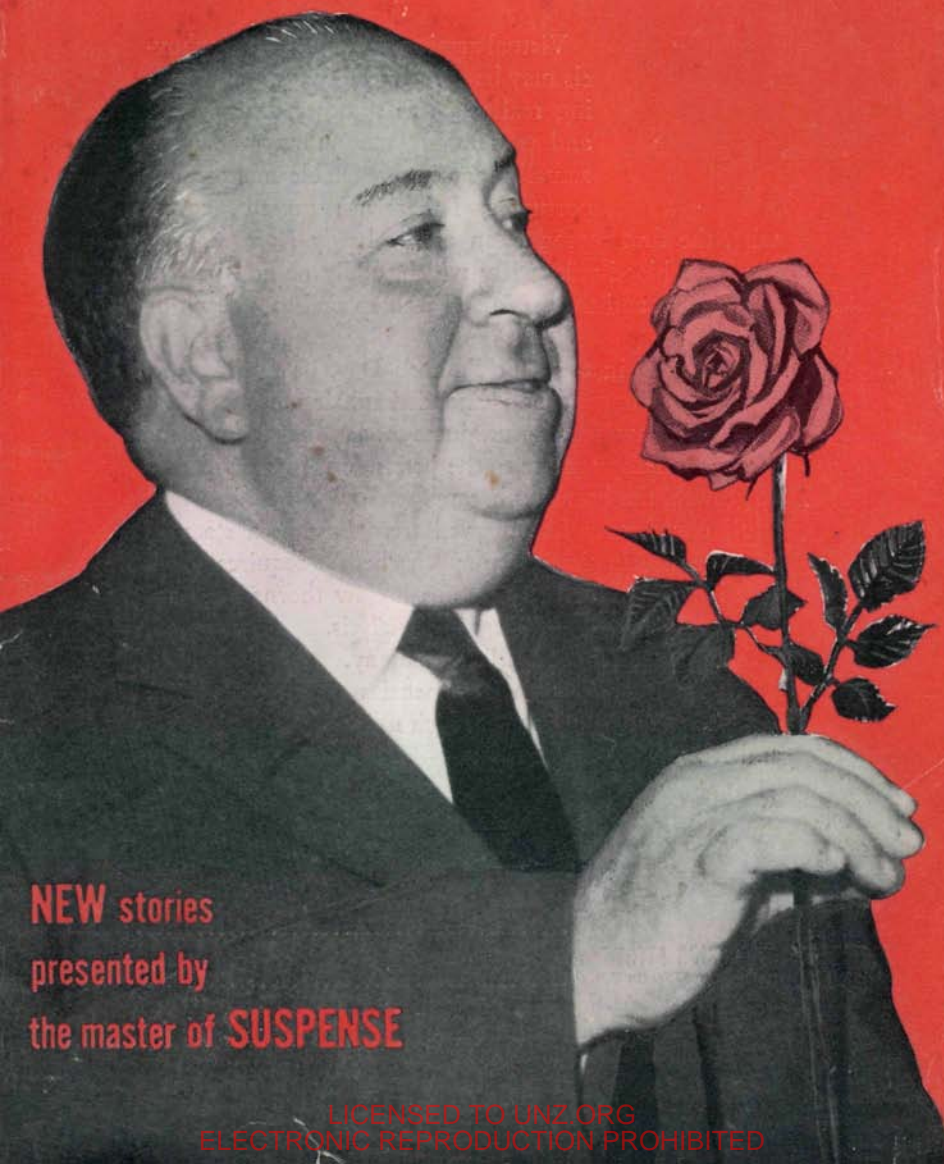


ALFRED

JUNE 50 c K

HITCHCOCK'S

MYSTERY MAGAZINE



NEW stories
presented by
the master of **SUSPENSE**

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June 1966

Dear Reader:

Virtual armies of people bearing shovels may be perceived digging the warming real estate as summer draws nigh, and presumably more than a few are actually planting vegetable matter. Opportunely, I herewith present, coverwise, the first reproduction of the hardy *Rosus Hitchcockus*, a blood-red variety which, oddly or not, prefers dark places and thrives in soil well spaded to a depth of six feet.

Introduced in time for Father's Day, its fragrance is heady and pungent, and extended inhalation should be avoided. Heavy feeding produces monstrous blooms, and there is a fleshy texture to the petals. With its rapid rate of growth, the branches become skeletal but limber, and adult plants may be observed trembling in a state of seeming anticipation when approached. It requires solicitous handling, for its numerous hollow thorns secrete a fluid which is still undergoing analysis.

So much for the vagaries of botany.

Although the sudden inclemencies of springtime are gone, there are other chills which most assuredly remain, and it is herein they await.

Alfred Hitchcock

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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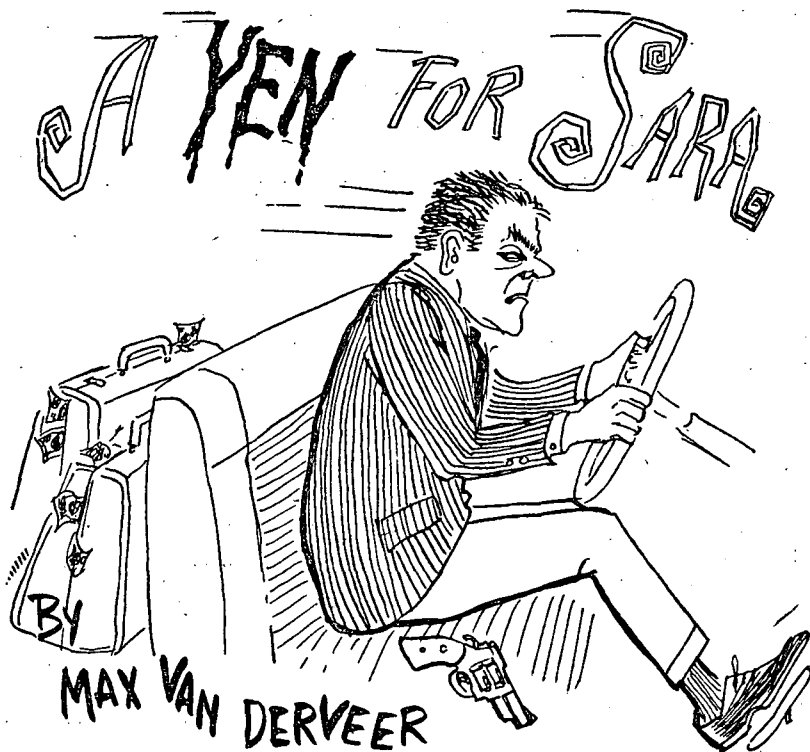
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*A person who would satiate a voracious appetite should be cautious
lest a savory tidbit dull his palate.*



FOLLOWING Arnie Hemp's instructions, I used the extra five thousand dollars he had given me to purchase the new model hardtop on Tuesday. It had snap and guts, and with me

at the wheel it would do the job for us. I had it licensed and got a clear title. Late Thursday night I dipped into the back row of heaps on a used car lot and got the extra

set of license plates that I needed.

Friday morning, wearing boots and hunter's garb over slacks and a sports shirt, I wheeled south out of the city with the dawn. It was a clear, crisp fall morning, and tooling along the highway I wondered if the others were on their way in the stolen cars. I kept a sharp eye out for all of them — Arnie, his brother Benjie, and Jo-Jo — but I didn't recognize any of the drivers I passed. At exactly eight o'clock, I rolled into the small town of Amber, circled the courthouse square and saw Arnie vacate a year-old sedan in front of the town's only hotel. Forty and lumpy, with hair curling on the back of his neck, he looked bulbous and awkward in the hunter's outfit.

I chuckled as he climbed into the front seat beside me. "Right on schedule."

"Shut up," he growled, "and wheel."

It was twelve miles to the next town, Taylor. I made it to the graveled side road two miles on our side of the town in eleven minutes, then turned onto the gravel. A mile and a half later I spotted Jo-Jo. He had backed a car into a lane that led from the road into a picked cornfield. He left it quickly and limped to us. He didn't wear the hunter's jacket, pants or boots well, either. He folded into the back seat.

"Are you sure nobody's gonna get nosey about that rod sittin' here?" he asked Arnie, his voice cracking with tension. "Seems to me a car sittin' out here in the wide open spaces—"

"Arnie's got it figured, Jo-Jo," I assured him as I backed around expertly and headed out to the highway again. "It's the pheasant hunting season. There are plenty of heaps parked along the roadways."

"The thinker," growled Arnie. "Well, I didn't pay you no five thou to think, bum. You're supposed to be an expert with the wheels, so wheel!"

I wheeled. I seethed, too. Where did Arnie Hemp get off calling me a bum?

Okay, so I hit a bad piece of luck on the track. So I spent years with the Midgets and dirt at the podunk county and state fairs. So I nudged and banged and shot a few guys off the tracks. So all of a sudden I'm barred from every track and driver's association in the country just because a few jerks saw me cut at the wrong time, and fix it so I'm never going to race again. Does that make me a bum, too?

"There he is, Harry," Jo-Jo said from the back seat as I eased off the accelerator and let the hardtop roll to a stop across the street from the parallel-parked black sedan opposite Taylor's courthouse square.

Benjie Hemp, a couple of years younger than his brother, tall, lean, and at ease in the hunter's outfit, got into the back seat beside Jo-Jo and said, "Roll. How's things, Arnie?"

"Milk and peaches," said the man beside me.

I pointed the hardtop toward the next town, Clayton, and kept the speedometer needle at sixty-eight miles per hour, two under the speed limit.

We arrived in Clayton — 6,000 population with about half of those six thousand employed at the chemical plant and the other half living off those employed at the plant — at exactly eight twenty-six, according to the large electric clock jutting out from a wall of the only bank in town.

"Take a right, Harry," Arnie directed as we waited for the traffic light at the bank corner to change. "The parking lot is behind the building. Park near the lot. It shouldn't be any trouble at this hour. Nobody's downtown yet."

I said, "I think I've got the picture, Arnie."

"Don't get smart, Thinker. Just wheel. That's all you were paid to do. Okay, there's your light."

I turned the corner and put the hardtop into the parking slot next to the bank parking lot. There was one other car parked in the block and it was on the opposite side of

the quiet street. I glanced sideways.

"Okay?" I asked, withdrawing the ignition key. I couldn't resist the sarcasm.

Arnie Hemp ignored it. "Let's go," he said, peeling out of the car.

We walked in a group, four hunters, back to the bank corner, crossed the intersection against a red light and entered the Topper Cafe. We slid into the first booth inside the door, the Hemp brothers on one side of the table, Jo-Jo and I facing them, and glanced over the other customers, hunters and natives.

Arnie scrutinized a wall clock. It was eight thirty-one. "We've got twenty-nine minutes till he arrives, then ten minutes while he drinks his coffee and buys the package of cigarettes. He's punctual."

"Have you slept with this dude, too?" I asked.

The eyes of the Hemp brothers blazed, and Jo-Jo shifted nervously on the seat beside me.

"Okay, okay," I said. "Just a little joke. We're supposed to be at ease, aren't we? Just jolly, fat hunters out for a jolly, fat hunt?"

We ordered full breakfasts from a waitress who wanted to know if we had been in the fields yet. I kept an eye on the stone block building through the front window, and at nine o'clock straight up, a young-looking dude in a neat, gray suit walked out of the front door and



crossed the street to the small cafe.

"Him?" I asked.

"Him," Arnie grunted.

"You've got this thing down cold, pal."

"Me'n Benjie didn't kill a week here for nothin', chum."

"Man! Vegas, here I come!" Jo-Jo breathed eagerly, rubbing his palms.

Ten minutes later, the young dude had finished his coffee and was at the cash register buying his package of cigarettes when we joined him. He went ahead of us out of the cafe and across the street. I separated from Arnie, Benjie and Jo-Jo at the corner but out of the corner of my eye, I saw them move in on the dude. In the next few seconds he was going to feel the muzzle of a gun drawn from a hunting jacket against his spine.

I walked down to my car, drove it into a slot near the back door of the bank building, idled the motor, then removed the two empty suitcases from the back seat and used the rear door to enter the bank.

Arnie, Benjie and Jo-Jo had things under control. Bank employes and customers had already been huddled into the lobby area and were flat on their faces on the floor. Jo-Jo was at the front door with a .45 in his hand, greeting new customers as they entered and inviting them to join the others on the floor. Arnie

and Benjie were waiting for the suitcases. The vault door gaped wide. Everything was quiet.

I returned to the hardtop, took the .45 from my jacket, put it on my lap, and moved the car into position. All Arnie, Benjie and Jo-Jo had to do now was rush out of the building and into the sedan.

They came running.

Fourteen minutes later, we had returned to Taylor. I stopped the hardtop beside the parallel-parked sedan. We had already shed the hunting outfits. Now we were just four guys in a heap.

The street was quiet. I looked in the rear view mirror. No cops. No chase. So far, we were running neat.

I piled out of the hardtop with Arnie and Jo-Jo. Benjie moved in behind the steering wheel, I took my two suitcases, Arnie grabbed the pair containing the haul, and Jo-Jo scooped up the discarded hunting togs. We loaded the back seat of the sedan and Benjie was off and running with the hardtop. Five miles out of town he would turn onto a side road and switch the license plates, using those I had stolen from the used car lot. It was a precaution in case some nosey devil had got a description of the car and our number as we were wheeling away from the Clayton bank. With the stolen plates, he'd be clean. No hunting togs, no loot from a bank stickup,

just a guy tooling along the highway. So the car he was driving tallied with a description of the car used in a Clayton bank job? Coincidence. Monday, he would put the legit plates on the car, use my papers and peddle the heap to a cash operator.

I wheeled the black sedan out to the graveled road where Jo-Jo had left his car parked in the lane. I shot him a glance as he bailed out of the front seat, but he didn't look at me. I chuckled. He was running tied in knots. Good; he'd take plenty of precautions.

I pulled ahead while Jo-Jo limped over to the car. He gunned the motor and shot up onto the road, skidded, straightened out, rolled toward the highway, and disappeared in the mushroom of dust.

"So far it's slick, Arnie," I said, backing the sedan into the lane. Jo-Jo had vacated.

"It's the way I figure things, fella," he said bluntly.

Yeah, it was the way he figured things, all right. Case the town and the bank. Check out the habits of some people. Then hit a gymnasium and pick up a couple of hungry guys to help, one to drive, the other to keep folks nice and quiet while the vault and cash drawers in the tellers' cages were being cleaned. Offer the guys five thousand each in cash, paid in advance. Use four cars so we can split into four direc-

tions after the job. Everybody go his own way. Me'n Jo-Jo with five thou each, the Hemp brothers to meet later and split the haul. Yeah, it was slick thinking.

The way I had it figured, the Hemp brothers might clean up about three hundred thousand.

So what happens if two guys *think*?

I lifted the .45 from my lap and shot Arnie Hemp between the eyes.

He died instantly.

I inventoried the road. Clear. No cruising hunters. No curious farmer.

I folded Arnie into the trunk and rolled toward the community of Amber. Jo-Jo was waiting in the supermarket parking lot when I wheeled into the slot beside him.

"Done?" he asked. He looked ill.

"Done," I grunted. I transferred the hunting clothes and suitcases quickly to his car. "You drive," I said.

And then we were out of the parking lot, leaving the sedan and its trunk content to some unfortunate who, I hoped, would not make the discovery before nightfall.

I crawled into the back seat and packed the hunting clothes into one of the suitcases as Jo-Jo turned the car back toward Taylor and Clayton.

"I got a hunch we should be

goin' the other way," Jo-Jo said jerkily.

"Somebody sure as hell saw us headin' east out of that town," I said. "So we play it smart. We head west. We go right back through where we've been."

"And if there are roadblocks?"

"We're just a couple of happy travelers, headin' for Vegas, right?"

"Yeah." He said it, but he didn't sound as if he were convinced.

I crawled over the seat, dropped beside him and lit a cigarette. It was my first of the day and the smoke tasted good. "Look, Jo-Jo, ain't I a thinker? As long as you've known me, ain't I always been a thinker?"

"Yeah."

"So I'm thinkin' now."

"Okay, Harry."

I'd met him at the gymnasium. Once he'd been a fighter, but there'd been this Korean thing, a bloody little war off in the boondocks, and Jo-Jo had caught it bad there. His body was a mass of scars, and he had a permanent limp. The only thing a limper can punch is a bag.

I liked him. He had a hard luck story, like me.

We had gone through Taylor and were about two miles toward Clayton when he let up on the accelerator suddenly and breathed, "Cops!"

"Easy, Jo-Jo," I said in a voice that was little more than a whisper.

"Keep the speed steady. And don't be curious."

The Highway Patrol car was parked along the shoulder of the highway. It was pointed east. I flashed it a glance as we whisked past. Two cops were in the front seat, the motor was idling. I wanted to twist around in the seat and look, but I forced myself to stare straight ahead.

We passed another cop car. The area was lousy with them, but there were no roadblocks.

The cops were spot checking. I felt better. They probably figured the car used in the stickup was already far gone from the area, but there was always the chance the hoods had holed up somewhere in Clayton, would attempt to drive casually out of town later. It didn't call for roadblocks, but it called for precaution. The checks also meant the cops had a description and/or the license number of the car they wanted.

I wondered how Benjie was doing in the hardtop. Give him another hour and he'd be okay. He'd be back in the city—waiting for Arnie and the green.

An hour later, the cops and the job were behind us. I crawled into the back seat again and counted the bills in the two suitcases. Two hundred and forty-seven thousand, eight hundred and thirteen dollars.

It was a good day's work. I took out a package of fifties and waved them under Jo-Jo's nose.

He came apart at the seams. He laughed all over the front seat.

Another mile down the road, I told him to pull over and I got behind the wheel. You can't trust anyone these days. A guy fired up like Jo-Jo could have an accident.

We rolled into a medium-sized, southern Colorado town at nightfall. I pulled into the parking lot of a bus depot and stopped.

Jo-Jo was puzzled.

"We need to change cars," I said. I dug some cash out of a suitcase and dropped it in his lap. "Go buy us a heap," I said. "Nothing fancy. Something off a used car lot that will get us to Vegas."

I explained. We were driving a stolen rod. Sooner or later, some smart cop was going to spot the license tag. And with what we had in the back seat, wouldn't that be juicy?

"I wish I had your brains, Harry," Jo-Jo said.

"Always thinkin', pal," I grinned. "Always."

He returned with a decent convertible, three years old. It wasn't going to attract wealthy divorcees, but it would get us a waitress or barmaid.

"I had to sign my name, Harry," Jo-Jo said.

"No trouble. You can change names later. You be thinkin' about one you'd like."

We cut out for Vegas. It was everything I expected it to be. I liked the gay glitter of the nights, the calm of brilliant mornings beside the pool, the building of late afternoon expectancy in the clubs, the free booze at the slots and tables.

Eight days after our arrival, Jo-Jo and I sat on the twin beds in the medium-priced motel and recounted our loot. We were ahead of the houses.

"That's sixty bucks more than we had when we got here!" Jo-Jo exclaimed happily as I finished the tally. "And you gotta figure our livin' out of that, too!"

"I have, Jo-Jo," I said speculatively.

"You've got somethin' in mind, Harry," he said accusingly.

"You wanna split?" I asked. "Down the middle?"

"How come? We've been doin' okay."

"Sara."

"Oh."

"You don't like Sara, huh?"

"Sure . . . she's okay."

"But you don't like *me'n Sara*."

"Well, you have kinda gone nuts about this doll, Harry."

"Yeah. You're right, Jo-Jo. I've gone nuts about Sara. Sara is the craziest. I've got a big yen for

Sara. A great big, crazy yen."

"You want me to move out, huh?"

"No, nothin' like that. I'll move out."

"You and Sara? You gonna get married?"

"Maybe."

"We split down the middle, huh?"

"Yeah."

"Now, Harry, I don't wanna do that. We've been doin' okay. In fact, we do good together. You know?"

"Yeah, sure, Jo-Jo, but me'n Sara — well, you know how those things go."

"No, I never had a dame. Not like that."

"Sara wants me to bug out for Little Rock. That's where she came from."

"Man! Leave Vegas? You're nuts! Vegas has been good to us, Harry."

"Yeah, pal. Damn good. I found Sara here."

"I mean green."

"Yeah. I know what you mean."

"But now you wanna take this broad over the green, huh?"

"She ain't a broad, Jo-Jo."

"Okay. Sorry, pal. Sara ain't a broad, but she ain't got real class, either."

"Still, I got a yen for her, Jo-Jo."

"So you got a yen. So a guy with a yen, his brains get scrambled. He forgets how to think."

"But I'm always thinkin', Jo-Jo."

"You ain't thinkin' when you let this dame know you got all this loot."

"She doesn't know about the loot, Jo-Jo."

"So how come she's so interested in you?"

"She thinks I'm a hot-cha-cha guy. That's all. Funsville."

"I gotta hunch she smells Loots-



ville, and has a yen for loot."

"No, nothin' like that, Jo-Jo. She's a workin' gal, remember. Secretary. Shark outfit. One of these loan businesses. You think she's gonna be a secretary for a shark, take all his gaff, if all she's got in mind is loot? Hell, she could make more standin' at a bar at the right hours than—"

"I don't like the split, Harry. You'n me, we been doin' fine."

"The only trouble is, chum," I grinned, "you ain't built like Sara."

"Yeah," he said morosely.

It was late afternoon when we drove into downtown Vegas. I needed a heap, new model. Sara liked new things. Sara'd go for that jazz. We'd hit Little Rock and her sister's place in style.

We were at the head of the line stopped for a traffic light when I saw him.

"Man, look at that!" I exploded.

"Benjie!" Jo-Jo wheezed.

All of a sudden, Jo-Jo was an ashen color.

Benjie crossed the intersection to our right, walking away from us. He hadn't spotted us.

"Roll, man!" Jo-Jo breathed.

"We gotta get out of town!"

"Easy," I said softly, letting the heap cruise after Benjie. I was thinking. I inched in toward the curb, waved traffic around us.

"Man, what do you think you're

doin'?" Jo-Jo rasped. "You crazy?"

"The rod," I said.

Jo-Jo gaped at me.

Cursing, I popped open the door of the glove compartment, yanked out the .45 and dropped it in Jo-Jo's lap.

"Get him!" I whispered.

We pulled up beside Benjie and I yelled at him. "Hey, chum!"

He stopped, stared, but he didn't change expression. And then he came to the car. Sucker!

Jo-Jo stuck the .45 in his face. "Get in."

Benjie stood fast. "You ain't gonna hit me here, creep."

I saw Jo-Jo's finger tighten against the trigger.

"You're living on seconds, Benjie," I said. "Jo-Jo is nervous."

Benjie didn't need another look at Jo-Jo's finger to get the message. He piled into the back seat and Jo-Jo swung around. He kept the rod down low, out of sight of passing traffic.

I eased the car into that traffic. "Small world," I said into the rear view mirror.

"They found Arnie, ghou! You really did a job on him." Benjie spoke in a soft voice. He sat quiet. He didn't seem rattled.

How had he found us? Then I remembered Jo-Jo in the cafe the morning of the job. He'd been enthused about heading for Vegas.

Jo-Jo had a big mouth, I decided.

I wheeled out to the motel and stopped in front of the unit. I was thinking hard and fast now, and I missed Jo-Jo's question the first time around. He repeated, "What are we doin' here? What are we gonna do with this dude here?"

I caught Benjie's reflection in the rear view mirror and gave him a lopsided grin. "We gotta talk, don't we?"

"I don't scare, creep," he answered icily.

"You should be more careful walkin' around in a strange town, Benjie," I laughed. "A guy can get himself killed."

"The green, creep. You got your loot. Now I want mine."

"Sure, Benjie. We'll talk about it. Let's go inside. Gimme the heater, Jo-Jo."

He hesitated, then passed the .45 to me. I jammed it into my pants pocket as we left the convertible. Benjie wouldn't run. I could cut him down before he got five strides away and he knew it.

Jo-Jo opened the door of our unit. I moved in behind Benjie as we stepped inside and brought the .45 down hard against the back of his skull. He groaned and pitched forward onto the rug. I took a .38 from his shoulder rig.

"Now what?" Jo-Jo wanted to know.

"There's only one thing, pal," I said calmly. I gave him the gun. "Keep Benjie on ice till I get back."

"Where yuh goin'?"

"Got a purchase to make."

I bought a shovel. It was out of sight in the trunk of the car when I returned to the motel. Benjie was awake, but he looked ill. He sat on the edge of the bed and held a wet towel against the back of his head.

"I owe you plenty, creep," he mumbled.

I hustled him up on his feet and to the door. Jo-Jo moved in to flank him. His eyes were questioning as he stared at me.

I took the .45 and pocketed it. "We make it look casual," I told them. "No cute tricks, Benjie."

I told Jo-Jo to drive, and I got into the back seat with Benjie. When we hit the highway, I pointed Jo-Jo out of the city onto the desert. The miles rolled under us and no one attempted to talk. Benjie was ice. I figured he knew what was ahead, and was attempting to conjure up something fancy in his head, but he sat without moving a muscle. I kept a sharp eye and the .45 on him.

We were miles into desolate country when I told Jo-Jo to wheel from the road and stop. Darkness was closing in fast. I motioned Benjie out of the car.

Jo-Jo turned on the front seat. "You gonna kill him, Harry?"

"You want him to be hauntin' us the rest of our lives, pal?"

Benjie threw a fist into my middle suddenly, and ran. He ran low and in a zig-zag pattern, but he was so easy, I laughed as I squeezed off the two shots. Benjie went face down into the sand and cactus and lay quiet.

Behind me Jo-Jo was wheezing noisily. He cut off the sound when I took the shovel out of the trunk. His eyes were round and his mouth was open. Suddenly he jackknifed over the hood of the car and buried his face in his arms.

I buried Benjie.

Jo-Jo was bent over and being sick when I finished.

"So . . . cold-blooded, Harry."

"But I'm thinkin', pal."

I deposited the shovel inside the trunk, banged down the lid, then went around and got into the convertible.

"When you're finished, you drive," I told Jo-Jo. "About ten miles should do it."

He reeled them off fast, but he didn't look at me as we rolled along.

"Okay," I said after a while.

We stopped again. I buried the shovel and the .45 and pushed the sand back into the opening with my feet.

Jo-Jo was all out of shape when

I had finished. "We . . . w-we gotta split, H-Harry," he stuttered.

"Yeah?" I said curiously. "You changin' your tune?"

He stared at me and it seemed that his eyes were out of focus. He was breathing noisily, and he was trembling.

Casually I took off my necktie.

"I-I can't take . . ." he blurted.

"How could you? How could you shoot him and—"

I whipped my tie around Jo-Jo's neck and strangled him.

It wasn't pleasant. I had kind of a strange feeling as I stood there staring down on his crumpled body. I'd always liked Jo-Jo. I'd never figured we were going to part this way. On the other hand, he had come apart at the seams. He had been babbling—and if some cop ever put the cuffs on him, for *any* reason, he'd probably have gone to pieces, shot off his mouth about everything.

I needed the shovel again but I wasn't going to dig it up with my bare hands, so I dumped Jo-Jo's body into the trunk and tooled back to the motel. I'd get rid of my cargo later.

Inside the unit, I dialed Sara's town apartment. While I listened to the ringing of her phone, I grinned at the two suitcases stacked innocently in one corner of the room. There was plenty of hay

over there in the corner, enough to take Sara and me to Switzerland where we could set up housekeeping and enjoy a decent bank account.

I chuckled. Out there on the desert earlier, thinking had been reflexive but I realized now that sooner or later I would have killed Jo-Jo anyway. With so much green involved, it was the only logical act.

Sara was breathless when she came on the line. A few seconds later, she squealed her surprise. "Tonight, honey? You want to go tonight? You'll have. . . ." She took a breath. "You'll have to give me a couple of hours to pack, Harry."

"Sure, doll. It's almost eight now. I'll pick you up at ten."

"No. Let me come there. I'll get a cab."

"Hell, I can swing in early enough, babe, to help you pack."

"No," she said firmly. "I have to go down to the office, too. I have some things. I'll take a cab. I'll be there by ten, Harry."

"Little Rock, here we come, kid."

"Wheee!"

I chuckled over her squeal as we broke the connection. She was a living doll, this one. A real package. The 50-megaton type—cute; cushiony; honest; uninhibited; explosive.

Yeah, she was going to be great in the Alps. She'd give those Swiss something to yodel about.

I packed everything, including

Jo-Jo's things, walked over to the motel office, paid the tab and explained to the nosey blonde there that Jo-Jo and I were due in L.A. the next evening. Business.

Then I went back to the room and mixed a strong highball. It was the first time I had relaxed since picking up Benjie Hemp that afternoon.

I felt free now. There no longer were any ties to the Hemp brothers or a bank job in a small midwest town. The brothers were dead and buried. And dead was my pal, Jo-Jo, who didn't have relatives or another honest friend in the world. All I had to do now was see that he got a decent burial in some wooded area along the road to Little Rock, then peddle the convertible that was registered in his name. I could get a good price for it in Mexico City and no questions about ownership. Sara and I could fly out of there to Europe and I could become strictly legit—a businessman; a young American businessman who had made his fortune early in life and now had sense enough to enjoy that fortune.

Man, I was thinking tonight!

Sara arrived in the cab at nine-fifty. I paid off the hackie, loaded her suitcases into the back seat of the car, took her into the unit and kissed her. She smelled good, and she was bright and bouncy; like a schoolgirl on her first date. I kissed

her again and then she looked around.

"Where's Jo-Jo?" she asked.

"Cut out, doll. L.A. Left me his heap and hopped a train. He'd had enough of Vegas."

"He got cleaned?" She looked surprised.

"In a sense, honey," I grinned.

"Then we're ready to go?"

"Set," I chuckled.

She giggled and crossed the room to the dresser. She picked up my drink and emptied the glass, leaving a red lipstick imprint.

"Then let's roll," she said.

I hauled the suitcases out of the unit, dumped them into the car, and we hit the highway. A couple of miles out on the desert, with the lights of Vegas behind us, Sara drew in a long, deep breath and exhaled slowly. "Lover," she said, "you don't know how good it feels to put that place behind me."

"This Little Rock must hold somethin' for yuh, kid," I laughed.

"Sure it does. I told you my sister lives there, and—"

"No, I mean more than your sis."

"Well, it's just a great town, that's all!"

I laughed again against the rush of night wind. "Yeah, baby, you make it *sound* great. But do yuh think you could shuck it?"

"What do yuh mean, Harry?"

I told her my plans. It was as if I had told her she had inherited a cluster of diamond mines. Suddenly she became serious. "Harry, what's your business, honey? Your racket? You never have said."

"You ever heard of a retired farmer, doll?"

"You?" She shook her head. "I'd never have guessed! You sure don't act or talk like any farmer I ever knew!"

"Point, kid; there aren't many farmers like me. I may be one of a kind."

"You are, Harry," she said somberly. "You are." She leaned across the seat and kissed my cheek.

We rolled into a small town at three o'clock in the morning. Sara was curled up, asleep, when I coasted past the 24-hour service station and spotted the motel lights. I pulled into the motel, got an attendant out of bed, registered as Mr. and Mrs. Harry Snow, and waved the attendant off when he half-heartedly offered to show me to the unit.

Sara protested after we were inside when I told her I was going back to the service station to gas up. "You can get gas in the morning, honey," she said, wrapping her arms around me and dropping her head against my shoulder.

I guided her over to the bed, chucked her chin with my fist, and

said, "We aren't gonna sleep long, doll. Couple, maybe three hours. I wanna roll early. Got a long drive tomorrow, and I wanna be ready to hit the road fast."

"Sure, Harry," she agreed sleepily.

I left her and drove into the business district of the town. The streets were deserted. I looked around for a cop. Nothing moved anywhere. I spotted a small hardware store, drove around to the other side of the block, parked, used the alley and found the rear entrance to the store. It was a snap. Three minutes later I had the shovel and was in the alley again. I pointed the car west along the highway. Five miles back, we had crossed a river and whisked through a heavily wooded area. Jo-Jo was due a burial.

After he was planted, I dumped his suitcases and the shovel into the river, then drove back to the town, gassed up at the service station and returned to the sleeping Sara.

She was happy the next morning. "I didn't hear you come in, darling."

"You were snoozin' good," I grinned.

"How'd your hands get so dirty?"

Dumb. Not thinking. I hadn't washed when I returned to the unit. I'd been bushed. "Had a flat," I lied. "I helped the station attendant change the wheel."

Our arrival in Little Rock surprised Sara's married sister. She bubbled and giggled, exclaimed and hugged.

Later I checked into a downtown hotel suite. I wanted to count my loot again, but I was too tired. I stretched out on the soft bed and grinned at the shadowed ceiling. I was finally living as I had been born to live; high. It was a buoyant feeling.

Three days later, with our trip to Mexico City and Europe now mapped, the buoyancy was pricked.

Two strangers rapped gentle knuckles on my suite door and when I allowed them to enter, they said they were Little Rock cops and that they had arrested Sara. They were holding her downtown for Las Vegas police. She was accused of stealing slightly more than two thousand dollars from the safe of the Vegas loan company where she had worked. Police were also checking into the embezzlement of the firm's funds by the same Sara.

"I don't know any Sara Malone," I squawked.

But the cops were firm. "You know her, Mr. Baxtell," one of them said. "You left Las Vegas with her. Before that departure, you and Sara Malone were seen together on various occasions. Daily—or should I say, nightly? Anyway, the night of her departure, Sara Malone

was in your motel unit. Police have a glass with her lipstick and finger prints on it. The prints match those found in her apartment. And if that isn't enough, Mr. Baxtell, Sara Malone has already told us you two have been planning a trip to Switzerland."

Sara Malone was stupid!

She had pinched two thousand bucks when I had over two *hundred* thousand! And here I had thought she was an honest, puritan type dame.

A man has to use his brains to get along these days. He has to think, think, think. He can't stop thinking for one instant. He can't allow a flashy female to blind his thought waves—or he could be dead! Sooner or later, the murders would out!

I bolted, banged my hands against the cop's shoulders and spun him out of my path, then shot a fist into the stomach of his companion, doubling him. Then I was out of the suite and running down the carpeted corridor, with a pair of gendarmes pounding along behind me.

There was no time for an elevator. I hit the service stairway and went down, skipping over steps, scrambling. I raced down four floors and burst into the hotel lobby. It was crowded, but there were doors—and freedom—ahead. I plunged through the crowd, hit a guy, bounced off. I hit a second man and reeled off balance to my right. The glittering metal-framed glass divider that separated the lobby lounge from the registration desk loomed ahead. I plunged, unable to stop myself, toward the divider.

I didn't have any sensation of pitching into the glass. All I was sure of now was, I was belly-down, flat on thick carpeting, and all around me the strange mixture of falling glass, shrill screams and hoarse shouts beat against my eardrums.

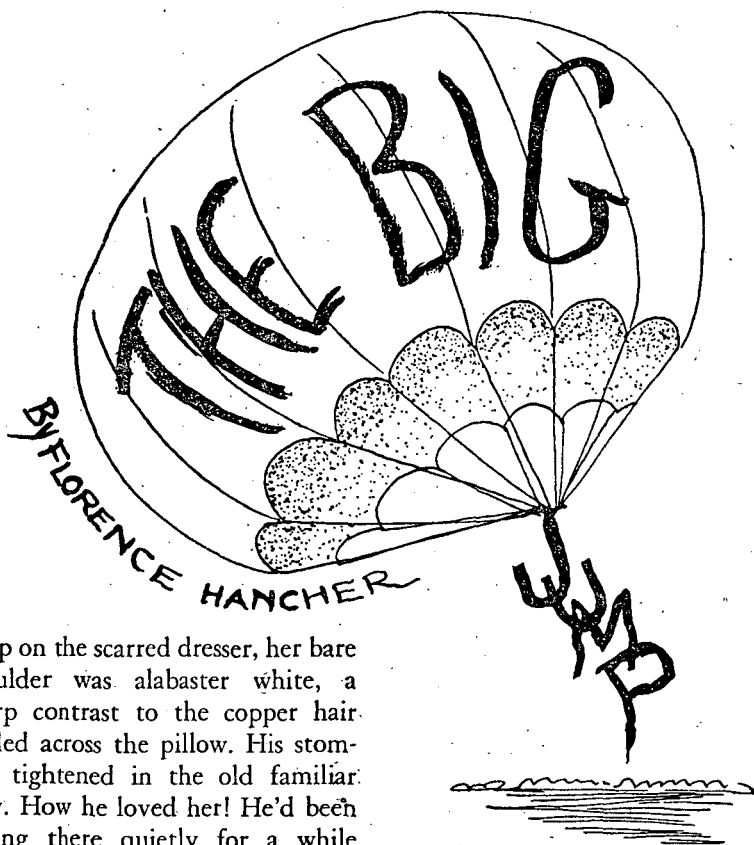
I rolled over slowly. I looked up. The horror of the moment pierced me.

My attempted outcry was choked off in my throat. I arched my body in one futile effort, then made my exit amid a bedlam of screams and shouts.



Though a mirage may dull the possessive grip of hallucinations, man may reap little solace in "... love is more cruel than lust."

WITH his hand on the doorknob, Corey turned for a last look at Natalie lying on the bed. In the weak light cast by the small chipped pink lamp on the scarred dresser, her bare shoulder was alabaster white, a sharp contrast to the copper hair spilled across the pillow. His stomach tightened in the old familiar way. How he loved her! He'd been sitting there quietly for a while thinking about it. From the chair her face had been in the shadows. Natalie didn't like the dark though, so he'd kept the light on.



lamp on the scarred dresser, her bare shoulder was alabaster white, a sharp contrast to the copper hair spilled across the pillow. His stomach tightened in the old familiar way. How he loved her! He'd been sitting there quietly for a while

He was glad she wouldn't have to stay in this grubby little room another night. Tomorrow . . . well, he'd think about it then. Now he was dead tired. He felt like he was moving in a dream. There's been so many sleepless nights. Now that he'd found Natalie he knew he could really sleep again, but not here in this strange room. He wanted his own bed back in the apartment that he and Natalie had shared during their brief nine months of marriage.

The past three months had been an agonizing time for him. First there had been the shock of coming home to an empty apartment, of realizing that Natalie had actually left him, and then the methodical, often hopeless, searching for her. But he had driven himself relentlessly. Natalie was his wife, and he could no more let her go than he could part with an arm or leg.

Now he had found her, at last, and everything was settled between them, everything was fine. He should be deliriously happy, but he was suddenly just very tired. His eyes swept across Natalie's figure, as relaxed as a baby's, and some of the pain eased out of them. Quietly, Corey closed the door behind him.

Although the building pulsed with life, no one was in sight as Corey went down the narrow hall and out the back door. His car, a

late model station wagon, was parked on the side street. Corey climbed in, and his eyes were heavy, his mind numb as he drove home.

Hours later the sun peeked around the corner of the apartment building, dropped to the sill of the open window on the second floor, and slithered inside the room. On a studio couch against the far wall, Corey thrashed his arms about, and a low groan propelled itself from his parched throat. His eyes snapped open and stared wildly at the greenish ceiling for an instant, then glazed as he blinked them several times.

While his long, lean body lay motionless, memories dredged from some gray secret place inside his skull brought a flicker of life into the thin, square-jawed face, washed the vagueness from the pale blue eyes. He sat up, and his bare back cooled as it raised from the sweat-soaked sheet.

He got up and padded across the room in his clinging shorts to the kitchenette where he got a bottle of ice water from the refrigerator. Tipping his head back he gulped in the coldness and sighed with satisfaction. *That was a little better. A little, but not much.*

Corey glanced at his watch. Eight-fifteen. Eight-fifteen on Sunday morning. He'd left Natalie's shortly after midnight, come straight

home and fallen into bed exhausted. Now, eight hours later, he was still tired. It was because he'd had another nightmare. He always woke up punchy and fuzzy-headed after the nightmares. Funny, he'd waited a long time to hold Natalie in his arms again, and now last night was just a blurred memory.

Well, he knew what he was going to do about it. With returning vigor he strode to the closet, reached for the large olive brown pack on the floor, and began tugging. As long as he had his chutes, he could feel like a king. It was a comforting thought.

Natalie didn't dig sky diving, and they'd had plenty of arguments over his addiction to the sport. "You've got to be crazy to jump out of an airplane just for fun," she'd maintained. "Only a nut would take a chance of getting himself killed for no reason."

He'd explained that it wasn't dangerous. He used two chutes and carefully observed the rules of safety.

"What good are rules if the parachute doesn't open?" she'd countered. "No, you think because you came through the fighting in Korea without a scratch that you've got a charmed life."

Korea . . . He'd been eighteen and now he was thirty, and all that time there had been the horrible

nightmares. Natalie didn't know it was the jumping that took away the terror of the dreams.

Today he was going to jump again. He'd go up, high, high into the quiet blue. He'd leave the plane, and then would come the exhilaration of the free fall. In the space of a few seconds, a few precious seconds when he was King of the Universe, he would fall a mile through space! He sucked in his breath, and his eyes began to come alive.

As Corey's blood quickened with anticipation of the freedom of height, and he moved around dressing and getting his gear together, the rooms seemed to grow cramped. It was as if the walls were creeping stealthily closer and closer to each other. Corey knew it was crazy, yet his eyes darted furtively to the left and right, as if he actually expected to surprise one of them in the act of moving.

He felt a panicky longing to escape and began to hurry, but in his haste he was clumsy. He dropped his stop watch and it fell at his feet, shattered. Impatiently, he turned away. The closet door hung open, the bed was rumpled, and his jump boots sat on the floor, forgotten, as he dragged his gear out into the hall and pulled the door shut.

He was stowing his parachutes into the back of his station wagon down in the parking area next to

the building when Mrs. Dougherty, 2 D, drove in and parked next to him. With her usual inquisitiveness, her sharp eyes swept over his bulky load. After she got out of her car, she hesitated for a moment beside him.

"Going sky diving again, I see," she said pleasantly. "It's been quite a while, hasn't it?"

Ignoring her as he would a pesky fly, Corey got into his car and backed out. The brakes squealed as he stopped suddenly for a car making a left, then he barrelled out into the traffic.

Half an hour later, twenty miles out of town, the tires hummed against the hot pavement, and up ahead there was a puddle of water in the highway. A mirage, Corey knew. He'd driven on the blistering California desert enough to know how the sun plays tricks. He wiped the trickles of sweat from his nose with the back of a hand and looked at his wristwatch. It was after ten now. It was getting late, he'd have to hurry.

Around the bend, a dirt road led off across the desert floor to a small airport five miles off the highway. A cloud of dust marked the car's progress as Corey jogged along the narrow trail towards the small hangar. The sun bounced off the yellow Cessna sitting on the field, and as Corey's gaze fastened on it,

the plane skipped down the runway and took to the air. Some lucky fools were going up to jump, Corey noted jealously. Well, one way or another, he'd be on the next flight.

—He was feeling better now. Seeing the field and the plane, and knowing he would soon be going up, made his body tingle with excitement. It wasn't the flying. He didn't give a hoot about it; in fact, it bored him. Like a boat, train, or bus, a plane was only a mode of transportation. His kicks came when he soared out into space, in the free fall where he maneuvered his body into various positions. It was the greatest! Fear? Sure, just before he jumped his stomach was tied in knots, his heart pounded against his ribs like a bongo, but it was an exciting fear. Not that other kind—

Twice in his life Corey had known fear, abject fear, the kind that turns a man into a quivering mass, and leaves him scarred for life. The first time was in Korea. He and a buddy, during an artillery attack on some fool hill, were running for a foxhole. Corey dived to safety, but Buck didn't make it. In his nightmares he still heard Buck calling to him.

The other time, he'd been driving the coast route between Los Angeles and San Francisco late at night, and there were few cars on the road. Either he dozed for a second, or was dulled by the monotony of

driving alone, but he never saw a thing before he heard the dull thud and felt the impact as the car hit a sizeable object. He stopped and ran back to the dark lump-like shadow at the side of the road. It was a man! A limp, rag doll of a man.

Somehow Corey found the strength to pull the body behind a bush, then run on spongy legs back to his car and drive off. He didn't know for sure if the man were really dead, and he never found out. Only that nameless face rose out of the dark, cavernous well of his mind to haunt him in the witching hours of the night. Over and over again, he drowned in his fear, cried out in agony, and then like this morning, awoke exhausted and dull of mind.

He'd been a man on the run, running from his memories, his fear, until he began to jump. In sky diving he'd proven to himself that he wasn't a coward, wasn't afraid. He'd gloried in his physical courage.

But today's jump was special. It was going to be his last one. He wasn't going to go up any more, now that he'd found Natalie. Natalie. Funny, but his thoughts had been only on the jump while he'd been driving out to the field. He was like that, concentrating on one thing at a time, finishing what he started before turning his thoughts to something else. Now when he tried to think of Natalie, his mind

pictured what his eyes had last seen. He remembered her copper hair and white shoulders—not her face.

Corey drove onto the dusty field and parked near the hangar. There were thirty or more cars already there. Corey got out and walked over to a small group of fellows near the coke machine. He spoke to the one with a clipboard in his hand.

"Mac, I want to go up on the next load," he said briskly.

Mac shook his head. "It's full. The first opening will be on the fourth."

Corey's eyes hardened. "Too late. Who's going up next?"

Mac glanced at his list. "Well, let's see. Jake, Frisco Smitty, and Paul Shields. He's a new jumper."

"Then let him wait. I'm a regular jumper here."

Mac frowned and shook his head. "Sure, Corey, I know. But you haven't been out for a while. Why didn't you get here earlier? You know this is perfect jump weather, and everybody will be out today." He waved an arm towards the road.

"Look at them come." Corey's eyes followed his wave and saw by the brown puffs that several cars were beating their way down the desert road. "I'll be lucky to get up myself," Mac groaned. "Sorry, Corey. Shall I put you down for the fourth?"

Corey's jaw set and his eyes narrowed. "No, I'm going on the next

load. Here's my dough." He slapped a bill into Mac's hand. "Put the new jumper on the fourth. I'll fix it with him. Where is he?"

With an indifferent shrug, Mac pocketed the money, and pointed toward a young man strapping on a chute a few yards away.

Corey walked over to the kid. "I'm taking your spot on the next load," he said bluntly. "You'll be on the fourth."

The kid looked up in annoyed surprise. "Hey now, I'm booked. I paid my five bucks."

Corey pulled out his wallet, and extended a twenty-dollar bill. "You'll be on the fourth," he said tightly. An uncertain grin appeared on the kid's face, but he took the money, and as Corey walked away, he began unstrapping his harness.

Back at his car, Corey pulled out his gear and spread it on the ground. There was a shout from a group on the field, and everyone looked up at the three jumpers who had left the plane and were free falling. Corey squinted against the sun for a moment. Then, when three parachutes blossomed, he turned away and began pulling on his white jump suit. He swore under his breath when he couldn't find his jump boots and realized he'd left them back at the apartment.

A jeep took off for the target area to bring back the jumpers. Shortly

afterward, the plane landed. Jake and Frisco Smitty walked out to it.

In spite of his urgency, Corey's hands moved deftly as he fastened the buckles on his harness. The main chute was on his back, and the smaller, reserve chute with the instrument panel was on his chest. When he was satisfied that everything was in order, he put on his football helmet. He was wearing moccasins instead of boots, and he didn't have a stopwatch, but, so what! He closed the back end of his car and looked back at the road. More dust balls. Corey walked swiftly toward the plane where the other two were waiting for him.

As he came up the men greeted him brusquely. He knew both of them as experienced jumpers. "Jake and I are jumping at seven five," Frisco Smitty informed him. "What altitude are you going?"

"Twelve five," Corey replied shortly. "I'm all set." He moved on.

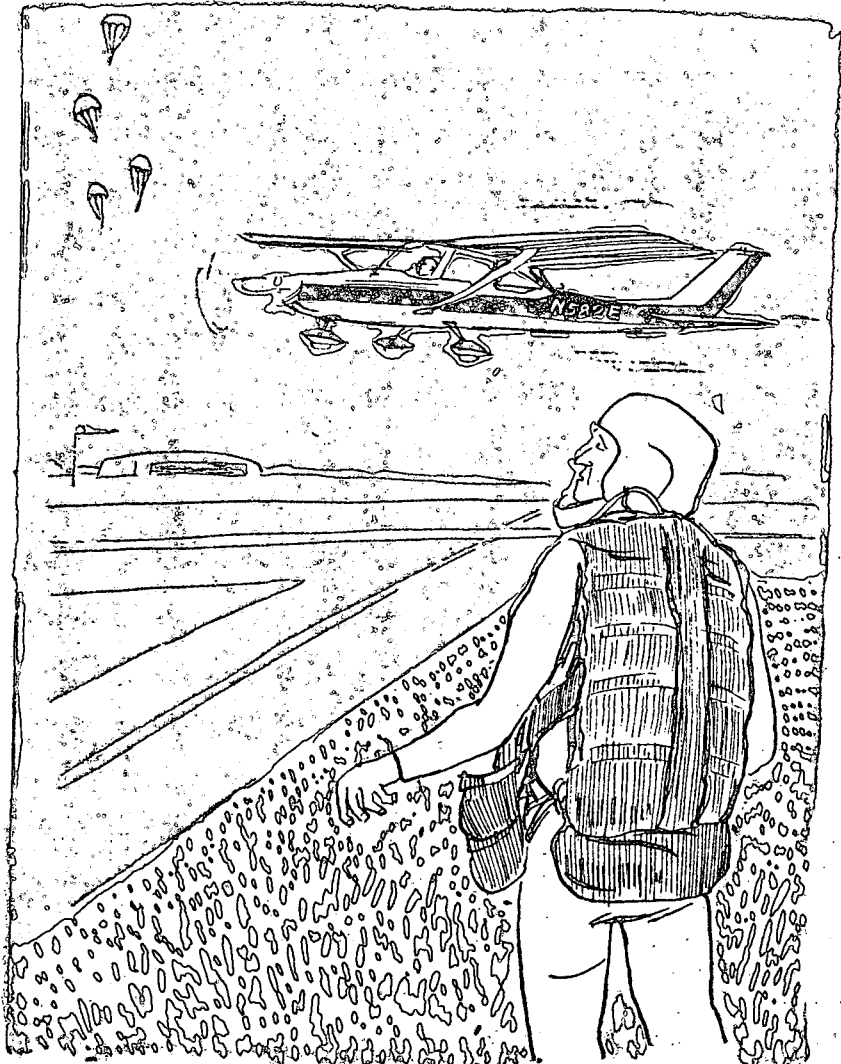
"Hey, Corey," Jake called impulsively, "can you loan me a smoke bomb, old buddy?" Then remembering, he added quickly, "Oops, I forgot." He turned to Smitty. "You got an extra?"

"I haven't even got one," Smitty answered, and the two men exchanged quick glances. Corey pretended not to notice, but he knew what they meant. No one ever borrowed from him. It was against his

principles to loan his possessions. As a kid, moved from one foster home to another, he'd learned to grab what he could and hold onto it. He didn't do favors and he didn't

expect any. He held onto his possessions fiercely—and that included his wife.

Corey climbed aboard and took the last seat back, since he would



be the last one out. He settled back, and as the plane raced down the field and was airborne, he let his thoughts return to Natalie and how it had been with them.

He was still a bachelor at twenty-nine when he'd met Natalie. There had been lots of women in his life, but he'd never seriously thought of marriage until Natalie. She was a cocktail waitress, and he spent one evening on a bar stool watching her every move. His steely eyes took in her slender legs, and the curves that were in the right places. Her red hair, casually fluffy, glinted under the artificial lighting. But it was her startlingly blue eyes in a pixie face that caught at his heart. He knew that first night that she had to be his, had to marry him.

And she did. He gave her a rush courtship, all the while conscious of other pairs of male eyes appraising her potential. He couldn't stand it. Natalie belonged to him, and no one else was going to have her ever.

The motor of the plane roared as it gained altitude, and Corey was aware that he was leaning forward, his hands clenched tightly together, his eyes staring unseeing into the patch of sky outside the small window. He relaxed his hands, and his thoughts flowed on.

After they were married there had been arguments, but Natalie had been all wrong to leave him. He was

a good husband. Still she complained that she couldn't stand being cooped up in the apartment all the time, couldn't stand not having money in her purse, a car to drive. It annoyed her because he called her from work several times a day. Complaints, complaints. But that was women, he guessed. One of his foster mothers had been a whiner. Her husband had belted her around a lot, but it hadn't stopped her.

Corey never laid a finger on Natalie, though—well, maybe a couple of times. When he found her packed suitcase in the closet that time, and again when he caught her sneaking out with his car keys one night after she thought he was asleep. But what did she expect? Why couldn't she realize that he was trying to take care of her? He paid the bills, ran the errands, did the shopping—all for her. He was trying to protect her, keep her home where she'd be safe from leering men.

But finally she had run away. When he came home one night she was gone. At first he was furious, then later he was halfway amused. Natalie knew he'd find her, he told himself, and then it became a game they were playing. A kid down the street had seen her get into a cab. That was a start. He played it cool, but he persisted relentlessly, questioning, tracking. At last, he'd found her working in a cafe out in the

suburbs, a quiet little hideaway.

But Corey didn't rush it. That night he sat across the street in his car and watched and waited. When she took a cab home, he followed—right to her closed door. Then he went home.

But last night he was back again outside the cafe. When she got off work at eight, she came out with a man who had been sitting at the counter. They got into a car and drove off together. When Natalie came home to her room two hours later, Corey was sitting on her bed waiting . . .

"Hey, I wonder what the fuzz is doing down there?" Jake's words, shouted at the other man, brought Corey back to his surroundings with a start.

"Probably chased some poor sucker out to give him a ticket for speeding," Frisco Smitty shouted back.

Corey arched his neck and looked below. They were circling the field to gain altitude, and down below the people looked like small dots moving about. A cloud of dust tailed the toy police car scurrying down the string-like road leading to the airport. There was a good-sized crowd down there, Corey noted. Well, they'd better prepare themselves for a thrill. Like always, he was going to show them a jump to remember.

Among local sky divers, Corey was considered an ace jumper. He might not be popular, but they admired his skill and daring. By now he knew the word would have spread that Corey was jumping, and all eyes would be turned skyward. Occasionally he did the spectacular, like feeding his chute by hand from a paper carry bag as he fell, or tying knots in his main chute so that it wouldn't open, and coming down with the reserve, which scared them plenty. Yessir, he sure showed the world that Corey had no fear! His lips twitched in grim amusement.

"Approaching target!" It was the voice of the pilot shouting to them.

"I'll spot," Jake yelled, and moved forward. For jumping purposes, there was no door on the Cessna. Jake knelt at the opening and stuck his head out and looked down. "Five degrees right," he called, and the plane veered as he directed. "Cut!" He yelled again, and the pilot throttled down.

Jake climbed out the door, placed one foot on the step and the other on a wheel. He held onto the struts for a moment, then kicked away from the plane. As he somersaulted downward, Frisco Smitty climbed out and then he too dropped. The pilot gave it the gas, and the plane shot away. Corey, looking back, saw first a yellow, and then a red-and-white parachute bobbing in the

sky, outlined against the blue.

The plane circled and went higher, and when the altimeter on his instrument panel read twelve-thousand-five-hundred feet, Corey moved to the door. When they had passed over the target, a small patch on the ground from this height, Corey left the plane. He dived out head first.

For some men it was liquor or the needle, for others speed or stalking a wild animal, but for Corey it was the free fall. It was such an exquisite thrill that it was almost agony.

He tumbled over and over in his downward rush. He finally managed to get into a spread-eagle position and stabilize, and now he was on his belly. This was the correct position, but he had already dropped a thousand feet. It had taken him longer than usual.

From twelve five, he would fall for sixty seconds and drop two miles. He'd have to open at four hundred. In the stabilizing position he could execute some maneuvers, but to his disgust, Corey went into a spin. He corrected it, but was wobbly. He felt like he was on a mattress

with someone bouncing on it. He was acting like a fool novice.

Suddenly his insides tightened and he was filled with panic. The sensation of falling filled him with fear. He stared out at the endless sky. His mouth opened to release the scream that filled his throat.

"Natalie . . . Natalieeeeeee!"

And his scream was answered! Natalie's face appeared there in the sky, and moved closer and closer to his startled eyes. Natalie's face as he'd seen it last night before he walked to the door—swollen, purple, her thickened tongue hanging out of black lips, her startling blue eyes glazed with terror. And on her neck were the marks of his fingers!

Now those same fingers were frozen on the rip cord and the altimeter read three hundred feet, two hundred—Corey continued his downward plunge unchecked. His paralyzing fear was written on his face for all to see.

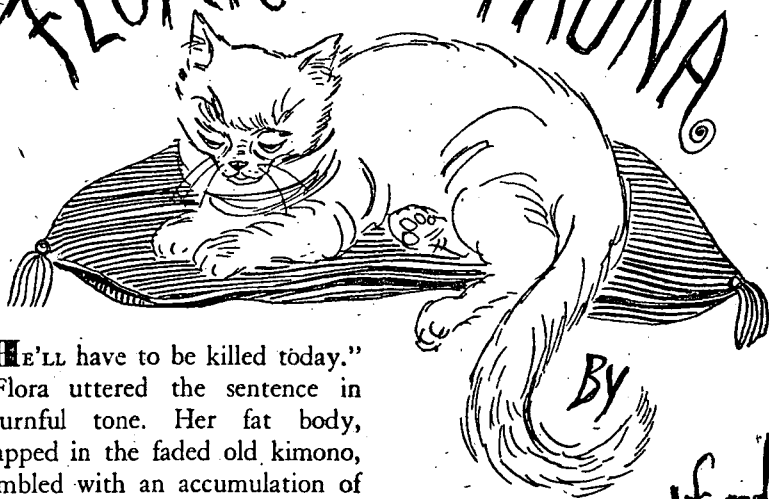
The dots below drew together in horror, forming a swaying blob. The police car kicked up dust balls as it raced down the field to collect its grisly passenger.



*When there reign cats and dogs, it may befit the occasion to revolt,
but one must look lively lest he expose his frailty to razzia.*



FLORA and her FAUNA



C.B. Gilford

"HE'LL have to be killed today."

Flora uttered the sentence in mournful tone. Her fat body, wrapped in the faded old kimono, trembled with an accumulation of sorrow. Her tear-stained face, the color and texture of dough, was a mask of desolation.

"Poor Rani. Oh, Howard, I shall have to kill him."

He stared at her. "You kill him, Flora?"

"Do you think I could let anybody else do it?"

He blinked. "I don't know. I didn't think you had it in you, Flora. Killing, I mean."

"But Rani is in pain, Howard, so it won't be murder, but mercy killing."

"Sure, mercy killing." He looked at her. Her hands were trembling violently. "Better let me do it, Flora."

"No!" She took a step toward

him, enraged, and he fell back, afraid of her, as always.

Yes, he was afraid of her. He had to admit it in moments like this. He was afraid of a woman, of his own wife, but he always had been. No excuse; there it was—afraid.

"All right, Flora. I was just trying to be helpful."

"Don't you dare touch Rani! Don't come near him!"

"All right, I won't."

He wouldn't touch Rani because he was afraid of her. He hated Rani, hated him with a cold passion, as he hated all of Flora's creatures; and Flora too; fear and hate.

"How will you kill him, Flora?" He couldn't help feeling curiosity, too.

"I have the poison already."

"You have poison?"

She reached into the pocket of her stained, tattered sweater, and drew out a small bottle. It was filled with a colorless liquid.

"Mr. Grotweiler gave me this, on prescription from Dr. Mason. It doesn't have any taste, or any odor. It works almost instantly, and with very little pain. Just a drop will do the job."

"But you have a whole bottleful."

"For emergencies."

It may have started in his mind then . . . the idea, the first glimmer, when he saw how easily it could be done. It was just a notion,

vague, unformed, but growing.

"I'll just mix it with some of Rani's food," Flora was saying, "and he'll never know the difference."

Horror on her face, Flora stopped suddenly and put her hand over her mouth. "Oh, do you think Rani heard me? I don't want him to know. It would be so much easier for him if he didn't know ahead of time."

Her pale blue eyes rolled as she cast a glance sideways toward Rani. The huge gray tomcat lay stretched on the center cushion of the red velvet sofa. Gray cat hairs cast a gray film over most of the red velvet. The sofa belonged to Rani, and Rani alone. The cat's eyes were half closed. It was doubtful whether he had heard Flora.

"Poor thing. Look at him. So brave. He doesn't complain at all."

No, the beast wasn't complaining. He was sick, probably on his last legs, Howard had to admit. Usually he was stalking through the house, lording it over everybody, so he must be sick. Good riddance.

"Go on now, Howard. I want to be alone with Rani during his last moments."

He left the parlor, closing the double doors behind him with a gentle click. He stood then for a moment, trying to think.

A whirl of wings startled him, and a green and yellow meteor flashed



past his face. "Stop that!" he shouted between his teeth, softly enough not to be heard by Flora. "You miserable bag of feathers!"

Pericles the parrot was perched on a lamp shade, viewing him mockingly. The dive-bombing routine was one of his favorites, because even though it had been done a thousand times, it never failed to surprise Howard and set him trembling. Now the parrot sat there arrogantly, aware that his victim could exact no vengeance.

"I could kill you!"

No, he couldn't. It was an idle, empty threat. If he could have killed Pericles, he would have done it long ago. He would have killed them all, every last creature in this ridiculous menagerie!

He had to get out. The heavy stench of animal odors, accumulated over the years, threatened to choke him. There was a layer of moulted fur and feathers over everything, turning into dust, and thence permeating the air. But worst of all were the Presences, the constant Presences, staring at him, watching him.

Along the wall were the aquaria. The inhabitants had stopped their lazy, aimless swimming about, and they were staring at him too with their stupid fish eyes. From cages in front of every window, the beady eyes of winged creatures

considered him. For the moment they had ceased their chattering just to look at him, the helpless Enemy, as if he were in a cage, not they. They knew he couldn't come near them. Flora wouldn't let him.

As for the creatures who roamed free, they sat on their haunches and stared, too . . . the cats and the dogs; Fritzie the noisy little dachshund; Pickles the nasty-tempered terrier; and worst of all, the disgusting Pekingese, Fan-Tan.

"I hate you!" he flung at them as he headed for the front door.

It was Fan-Tan, as usual, who translated emotion into deeds. Howard heard the scurry of tiny paws behind him. Ignominiously he ran, but not quickly enough. The little red-brown canine overtook him, leaped at his flying ankle, and sank her needle teeth into the retreating flesh.

Howard knew better than to yell. He dragged the dog a few steps, managed to shake her off, and then to put the screen door between them. He ran across the sagging veranda, down the steps, through the weedy yard, and didn't stop for breath until he reached his hideout, the run-down building which had been the stable in the plantation's better days.

Animals had evicted the man from his house. Now the man inhabited the abode of animals.

Howard drank rum from a bottle he kept secreted in the stable, and pondered his present predicament.

Why had he married Flora? Or had Flora merely married him? He must have said yes sometime during the ceremony, but what had he said yes to?

He hadn't been much of a catch, and plenty of women, before Flora came along, had declined to catch him. He'd been a veterinarian's helper, interested in animals, you might say. That, of course, had given him and Flora "something in common".

So he'd married her. He was dirt poor, and she was sort of rich, in a small way. She owned this piece of land she called a "plantation", with the big old house on it, and had money and bonds and things left her by her daddy, enough to keep it all for safety's sake in several different banks in several different towns.

"You and me," Flora had said, "we'll have a fine life together. You can help me take care of my pets."

He saw her collection of pets, and . . . well, it wouldn't be much different from the kind of things he'd already been doing. The only trouble was, he really didn't *like* animals. He hadn't been exactly a great success as a vet's helper. It had been a job. A ditch-digger doesn't

have to *like* the ditches he digs.

So he'd married her, legally anyway. Actually she'd stayed married to her zoo. Howard was simply installed as full-time helper and assistant; same job, new employer.

Only this was much worse: *full-time*. Now he ate, slept, lived with the animals. And most horrible, he was asked to love them.

He cursed softly to himself and swigged his rum. He'd moved into Flora's house because he didn't have one. He hadn't liked the looks of it, but he thought maybe he could clean it up a bit, and maybe, gradually, get rid of at least some of the creatures. No such luck. Flora only added to, never subtracted from her collection. Even the little boy who'd been sent a baby alligator from Florida, and whose mother wouldn't let him keep it, had brought the thing to the one place where he knew it wouldn't be refused. So now an alligator named Alice lived in the bathtub upstairs, the only bathtub in the house. If anyone wanted to take a bath, he first had to remove, then to replace, a two-and-a-half-foot reptile. Usually Howard preferred to go sweaty.

As for meals, they were "family" affairs, as Flora described them. She always had a cat, Rani if he was in the mood, in her lap, eating off her plate whatever tidbits struck the

feline fancy. The dog hung around, haughtily demanding. Conversation was, of course, impossible with their constant yapping. Fan-Tan perversely gave her attentions to him. She would nip at his ankles if he would ignore her too long, and then when he stooped to feed her a morsel, he'd have to withdraw his fingers quickly or she'd have them too.

"She's your little doggie, Howard," Flora would say, pouting jealously.

The caged beasts weren't quite as bad, except that Howard had to clean their cages, a nasty job. Flora was always too busy. Maybe she'd married him just to get somebody to do that.

Perhaps the crowning indignity, however, had been that perpetrated by Rani. Howard liked his rum. It made life barely endurable. But Rani, attracted by the smell of the hidden bottle, formed a liking for it too. Flora's first reaction was to decree that the stuff be kept out of the house. Then when Rani meowed inconsolably, she relented. Howard was allowed to keep his rum if Rani could have an eyedropperful once in a while. Rani proved an inveterate guzzler though. He'd seek out the bottle, lick the neck and the cork till it made Howard sick, and sometimes he'd go for days without a drink before he'd touch

that unsanitary bottle. Maybe, he thought now with some satisfaction, Rani's fatal illness was alcoholism.

Why hadn't he left it long ago? He'd asked himself that question a million times, and now he asked it again. Why did he put up with it?

Hope? It must be. Hope, and then sheer perseverance. He wouldn't admit defeat by a bunch of animals. He wouldn't let them cheat him out of his inheritance. And he meant to inherit, because Flora was twenty years older than he was, and sooner or later she was going to catch something from all those germs from those unsanitary plates, and then he'd be rich! *Then!* Why not now?

Howard took another swig of rum, and thought of that other bottle which Flora had shown him. No taste . . . no odor . . . works almost instantly . . . just a drop will do the job . . . and there was a whole bottleful.

Flora's piercing scream brought him back to the house on the run. She was standing on the veranda, flailing about with her arms and still screaming, when he arrived.

"He's dead!" she wailed. "Rani is dead!"

"Well, that's what you wanted to accomplish, wasn't it?"

But she wouldn't be comforted by such simple logic. "He didn't want to die. He knew what I was trying to do, but he didn't understand. He

didn't even seem to trust me. Then, finally, when he realized what I'd done to him, he looked at me with such reproachful eyes. Oh, Howard, I'll never forget that look. I tried to explain, but he kept shaking his head. Howard, he died thinking I betrayed him."

"Well, we can't have that, can we, Flora?"

"Animals are so wise, Howard. They know who their friends are. But mercy-killing was a little too much for Rani to understand."

"Then you mustn't do it any more, Flora. I mean, you mustn't do it yourself. I should be the one. The animals don't feel the same toward me anyway, so it won't be such a shock to them."

She stared at him through reddened rims. "Maybe you're right."

"Of course I'm right, Flora dear. Just give me the bottle, and when the next time comes, why I'll . . ."

She entrusted him with the bottle, and he hid it in the stable. Afterwards he used a couple of fresh boards to make a little coffin for Rani. He did the work cheerfully, and when he brought the result to Flora, she thought it was beautiful.

Then he took a spade out to the cemetery, which was between the neglected orchard and the old grape arbor. The cemetery was, in fact, the only neatly maintained plot on

the whole plantation. Flora had decreed that it be kept fertilized, weeded, and mowed. To Howard's knowledge there were two canaries, several mice—Rani himself had dispatched more than one of them—and a monkey already there. Howard dug a rectangular grave about three feet deep, then informed Flora.

She tried to induce some of the other animals to attend the funeral, but Rani had not been a universally liked member of the community. Pericles and Fan-Tan never left the house, and they made no exception for this event. Pickles the terrier attended out of his natural curiosity concerning carrion. Flora carried two of the white mice with her, as a kind of corsage. Howard thought for a while she might have intended to bury the rodents with the coffin, thus giving Rani something of a pharaoh's funeral. But if she had so intended, she relented at the last moment, and the mice were spared.

It was an impressive ceremony nevertheless. Howard bore the coffin, placed it in the ground, and shoveled the dirt back on top of it. This was the occasion for Flora to burst into hysterical tears, throw herself on the ground, and try to claw the dirt away again. Finally she contented herself with racing madly through the adjoining fields

and returning with an armful of wild flowers to strew over the grave. It was sundown before the weeping subsided and Flora allowed herself to be led back into the house.

"One must go on living," she told Howard.

It isn't absolutely necessary, Flora, he answered silently. Not if life is so painful. That's what the stuff in the bottle is for, didn't you say? To kill pain. Should I do any less for you than for Rani, Flora?

"It's supper time," he announced hopefully.

"Oh, I couldn't eat a thing," Flora said hoarsely.

"You've got to keep up your strength, my dear." She was strong as an ox, with plenty of excess fat besides, but he said it anyway. "You have your other responsibilities, remember. To the other animals, I mean. You can't afford to neglect them. Rani wouldn't want you to do that, I'm sure."

She looked at him, her eyes red and bulging, brimming with tears. "I have a big lump in my throat, Howard. I just couldn't swallow."

He had to accept defeat for the moment, but he knew he couldn't delay too long. Proper timing was essential to the motivation he wanted to establish.

Flora was inconsolable. Watching her mope around the house, the animals moped too. The chattering

in the cages stopped. Fan-Tan ceased her yapping, curled on a pillow, and gazed at Flora with unblinking eyes. Pericles sat on his perch without saying a word. A blessed silence reigned, and Howard couldn't help thinking they should have funerals more often around this place.

Flora went to bed without breaking her fast. For hours she tossed and turned, then finally slept. It was late in the morning before she awakened.

"Let me bring you something, Flora," was the first thing he said to her.

"A couple of aspirin," she told him.

"With some orange juice? Would you like some orange juice, Flora?"

"I'll try to down it."

He hurried to the kitchen, opened a can of juice, poured it into a glass over an ice cube. Then he added a stiff shot of the liquid from Mr. Grotweiler's bottle, and stirred. He couldn't tell about the taste, of course, but the concoction smelled of nothing but orange juice. As for the advertised qualities of the stuff, he'd just have to trust Mr. Grotweiler. He wiped his fingerprints from the glass, wrapped a paper napkin around it, and carried it up to Flora.

"You're a dear sweet man, Howard," she said, and these were her last words.

She drank the orange juice thirstily, obviously relishing the taste and unaware of any foreign substance. Afterwards she lay back on the pillow, smiling serenely. This state obtained for perhaps a minute or less. Then a mild frown crossed her face. She looked puzzled, glanced at Howard questioningly, and peacefully closed her eyes.

"Goodbye, Flora," he said.

She didn't answer.

He wasted no time whatsoever after that. It was feeding time at the zoo. Mr. Grotweiler's magic elixir had to be mixed with dog food, cat food, mouse food, rat food, hamster food, fish food and parrot food. He did it all with skill and dispatch.

"Eat heartily, my pets," he crowed as he distributed the treated tidbits.

In the bathroom Alice the alligator chewed on a piece of dosed beefsteak, while in the front parlor the fish leaped to the surface of the water to nibble at their little white flakes. For good measure, Howard poured some of the poison straight into the water too. The rodents positively fought over their morsels, and Howard had to referee to make certain everybody got some. The cats devoured theirs daintily and haughtily. Fritzie and Pickles gave no trouble. Fan-Tan was morose and reluctant, wondering

why Flora didn't get out of bed to do the honors, but eventually sheer hunger triumphed. Pericles cocked one eye suspiciously at his poison-soaked seed, but he didn't prove to be nearly as wise as Flora had always thought he was. He pecked at his victuals a few times, and a few pecks were enough.

Howard watched. He wanted to make sure everybody was taken care of. Everybody was.

The fish began floating to the surface. The rodents squeaked shrilly, ran about their cages, and one by one dropped over. The cats meowed a few times, arched their backs, and collapsed. Fritzie barked, Pickles growled, and Fan-Tan yelped for the last time, then lay down and was still. Pericles was the toughest of the lot. He wobbled on his perch, considered the carnage with a cynical gaze, closed one eye, then the other, lost his balance, and fell forward. His claws held onto the round perch, however, so that he hung upside down, swinging gently like a slow pendulum. It was more than a minute before he let go, and the body fell to the floor with a feather-muffled thud.

Howard checked the bathroom. Alice was floating in the tub belly-up. He was alone in the house.

Sheriff Crandall was noticeably sympathetic but also profoundly

confused as he gazed about at the scene of death and tranquility. "My, my," was all he could say for awhile. "My, my . . ."

"They're all gone," Howard said tearfully. "Every little teeny-weeny fish in the bowls, every little bundle of fur in the cages. And Flora . . ."

"You say she had this bottle full of poison?"

"It only takes a drop, you know, Sheriff, to still those little animal hearts."

"Now it started, you say, with the cat?"

"Right, Sheriff. Rani was her favorite, of course. I'll show you the fresh grave if you like, or dig up the coffin."

"No, no, that won't be necessary, Howard."

"Well, she just couldn't seem to snap out of it. She threw herself on Rani's grave, put flowers on it. You know how Flora was about animals."

"Yes, I guess everybody around here knew about that."

"I finally dragged her back into the house, but there wasn't anything I could say or do to cheer her up. I should have suspected something, I guess."

"Now don't go blaming yourself, Howard. This was just one of those things."

"Well, you know how Flora considered the animals to be her family,

and she always wanted to keep the family together. I guess she just went crazy with grief. First poisoned all the animals. Then finally herself. So as to keep the family together."

Sheriff Crandall peered out from under his grizzly brows and scratched his head. "How come she didn't take you along with the rest of 'em, Howard?"

Howard shook his head. "I don't know, Sheriff. I guess it just goes to show where I stood with Flora. She and her pets were sort of blood relatives, and I was just related by marriage."

"I know how you feel, Howard. Sometimes a husband just gets left out in the cold."

They walked out onto the veranda together. It was a nice day, beginning to warm.

"Sheriff," Howard asked, "do you want the bodies for an autopsy, or can I just phone the mortuary?"

"Oh, I don't reckon there's any good reason for an autopsy."

"Well then, there's this other thing. Everybody knows Flora had it in her will. She always wanted to be buried here on the property, in our own private little cemetery."

"Far as I know, Howard, there's no law agin' it."

"And the animals belong there too."

"No law agin' that either." Sheriff Crandall, glad to be gone,

drove away in his dusty pickup. He hadn't been any trouble, none at all.

Howard phoned Mr. Murdock the undertaker and gave instructions. Plain, simple coffin for Flora, and he'd take care of the animals himself. No cemetery plot needed. He could save money that way. That was important. It was his money now.

He felt like celebrating. There was that bottle of rum he kept behind the books in the back parlor. He took the bottle to the kitchen and poured himself a glass.

It wasn't until a couple of swallows had gone all the way down his gullet that he began to have the odd sensation—a feeling of dizziness, lightness, fuzziness, a gray fog creeping over him.

Then into the fog came a blinding flash of comprehension. Rani had known what Flora was trying to do to him, to poison him. He had refused the food, the milk, till Flora tricked him with his fatal weakness for rum . . . left it nearby where he could steal a lick of the cork and the wet bottle neck . . . but she'd poisoned the whole bottle!

"Poor old Howard," Sheriff Crandall said. "That last talk we had together. He felt left out. Flora had gone and left him. The animals were

all gone. He was all alone. Just couldn't stand the loneliness, I guess. So he just followed along after the rest of the family."

"I understand," said Mr. Murdock the undertaker.

"So I guess we'd better bury 'em all here together in their own private little cemetery."

"Of course," said Mr. Murdock.

"Oh, Howard, you dear sweet man," Flora said, "we've missed you so, even though it wasn't for very long."

A green and yellow meteor flashed before his face and the flutter of parrot wings sent a shudder all through him. He heard a splash of water in the bathtub that could have been made only by an alligator's tail. Fish eyes stared at him from huge glass tanks. Dozens of rodents chattered their welcome. Cats stalked by. A dachshund and a terrier growled fiercely in his direction, and a small Pekingese sank savage needle-like teeth into his ankle. And there was Rani, the lordly tom, licking the neck and cork of his rum bottle, and smiling with inebriated contempt.

Howard screamed and turned to run, but there was no door. He screamed louder. He knew there were people outside, but his scream was drowned by the din of the earth entombing him.

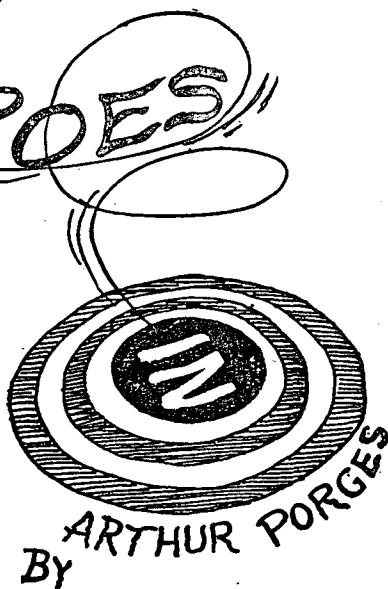
The following may serve to alleviate somewhat the stigma of judicious precaution usually associated with, "Small pitchers have wyde eares."



a "talent" in biology for any age.

As Mr. Sanford ran the tape for the third time, hoping, perhaps, that the sound of his son's voice might resolve the dilemma it had raised, Janie took notes and pondered. To her, it was like working on the initial stages of another "project" at the Kenilworth School.

"They're holding me, Dad," the boyish voice announced with a light-



In their fear and indecision, the Sanfords forgot all about Janie, huddled so quietly in the big chair by the fireplace. She should have been in bed hours ago, although they did permit some leeway at times, since the girl dealt in moths, bats, crickets, and other nocturnal creatures. At age eleven, thin, gawky, freckled, and redeemed from ugliness only by her huge, brown eyes, liquid-bright with animation and intelligence, Janie was definitely

JANIE ZEROES IN

ness obviously assumed. "I can't say where, of course. But unless you skip that Council meeting Monday, they'll 'take steps.' It's not a matter of killing; they want me to make that plain. They're talking about my—" here there was a faint hum in his voice—"fingers. I can't say any more; except that I'm okay so far."

"Bill's fingers!" Mrs. Sanford exclaimed, as she had on each playing. "What terrible men!"

"That's why I'm sure Ed Corey's behind it, all right," her husband gritted. "He operates that way. If I pass up the meeting and can't vote, the Council will sell his company Glen Devon, and there goes our last chance for a decent park."

"You'll have to do as they say," she sighed. "We simply can't risk Bill's hands."

His face was grim. Sometimes he wished the boy had a different flair. They'd been guarding those nimble fingers of his for years now, it seemed. Why couldn't Bill like law or mathematics or some other field where hands weren't so important? But just a week from tonight he would play Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto with the Symphony, unless Corey's hoods broke the kid's fingers. They wouldn't hesitate for a second, not with so juicy a land-grab at stake; and with a musician, an injury of that kind was terribly

serious. The damage might be permanent, no matter how skillful the medical care later. Certainly it was not a risk to be taken lightly.

"Well," Mr. Sanford said heavily, "we've been all through it a dozen times, and I still don't know the answer. Do we call in the police, or obey instructions—fold up, and let Corey rake in the chips?"

"I haven't changed my mind," his wife said. "Bill's career means more to me than any park."

"That's just part of it. Everybody will think I sold out. I'll be through in politics here."

"I know, and it's terribly unfair. But what choice do we have? If you tell the police, what could they do? Where would they hunt for Bill? He might be next door, or fifty miles away. How could they find him before the meeting, only three days away, with no idea in the world where to look."

"Maybe I could help them," a young voice, full of confidence, said, and Mrs. Sanford started.

"Janie!" she cried. "Have you been there all this time? Why, it's almost midnight, child."

"I've been listening to Bill's tape—and figuring," the girl said.

"This isn't a game," her father said impatiently. "It's very serious."

"I know that. So am I, Daddy."

There was a note of reproof in her answer. She loved her parents dear-

ly, but often wished they were less emotional and more logical in their attitude towards the world. But then people who decided automatically, without data, that bats and insects were unpleasant beasts needed a lot of education. It might take years, Janie told herself now, with a sigh.

"Go to bed," Mr. Sanford said brusquely. "Your mother and I have a problem to discuss. We need peace and quiet, child, not fantasy." He turned back to his wife. "You know," he said, "Corey has outsmarted himself. Even if I stay away, he loses. One of the votes he counted on, Hugh Morton's, won't materialize. Hughie got banged up in a traffic accident in Redwood Falls, and can't be here. I just got the word a few hours ago. That means a tie, and Mayor Leavitt has the deciding vote. He'll back the park: he's a good man, and committed to the hilt."

"He smells of stale rye bread," Janie's light voice cut in again.

"What on earth!" Mrs. Sanford exclaimed.

In spite of the situation, her husband grinned wryly. "Irv likes kummel," he said, "and *was* hitting it hard the day Janie met him. It not only smells that way, but tastes like liquid rye, too. I'll take whiskey," he added.

"Daddy," Janie said, "I really

have an idea. It ought to work."

"All right," her mother said, looking at Mr. Sanford for approval. "It's no use trying to shoo her away once she has a notion. Let's have it, Baby, so we can get you to bed by dawn."

Janie winced at the "Baby", but knew this was no time to make an issue of the revolting word. "You listened to Bill," she said severely, "and missed all the important sounds on the tape."

"Like what?" her father demanded.

"Well, the crickets, for one thing."

"What about them, for Heaven's sake? They're all over the country."

"Yes, but there's a simple, definite relation between the number of chirps per minute and the temperature outside. Lutz gives it in his 'Fieldbook'. I did the arithmetic, and got seventy-four degrees."

The Sanfords looked at each other blankly.

"So we know how warm it was there. How does that help?" her mother asked.

"That's a pretty low reading for sunset during this hot spell, Mom. Not many places around here would have it."

"What makes you think the tape was made at sunset, may I ask?" Mr. Sanford said.

"Didn't you even hear the red-

wings, blackbirds? Crickets start chirping at dusk, usually; and birds are pretty quiet by dark, so I figured—”

“Never mind; I get it!” her father said hastily. “My head’s not solid bone, only two-thirds.”

“How does that tell us where Bill is?” his wife asked in a plaintive voice.

“Then there are the frogs,” Janie went on inexorably, fixing her enormous brown eyes, warm and soft as melted caramel, on each of them in turn. “Redwings and frogs mean water.”

“You have a good point,” Mr. Sanford admitted. “But, honey, that’s just not enough to go on. I’m afraid—”

“We’ve had no decent rain since March,” his daughter reminded him. “You know how dry this whole area is. Really, Daddy, there are only a few places within miles of here that aren’t dry as a bone by now. So with redwings (and that

means tule reeds; they love ’em!) and kingfishers, I thought—”

“Kingfishers?” he gulped.

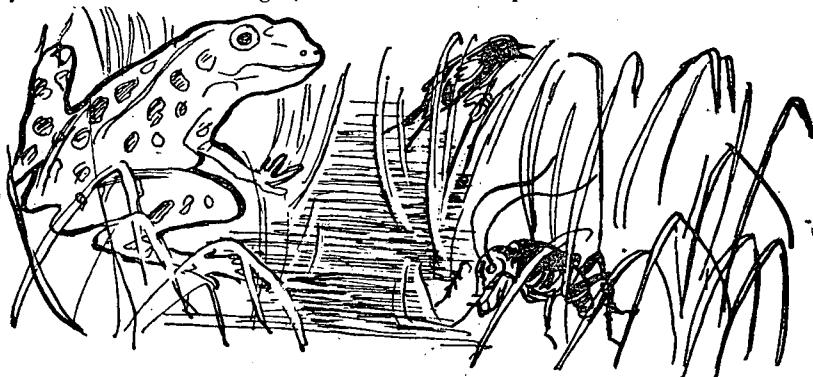
“They’re birds. You can hear one rattling in the background. It just has to be on the old Larrabee Ranch. It has thousands of acres, a lot of old buildings, tules and ponds; and there’s one little valley, where the sun is blocked off. I’ll bet that’s the place; cool air sorta settles down in the low spots. That’s where Bill must be.”

“Fred,” Mrs. Sanford said, “she makes sense.”

“We could phone old Mr. Renfrew on the Santa Clara Rancho,” Jamie suggested. “He keeps his own weather reports. He’ll be able to tell us what the readings were at the edge of Larrabee, at least.”

Mr. Sanford looked at her with a kind of wonder.

“I’ll call Chief Thompson early in the morning; ask him to arrange for a search—kind of raid, rather—in that part of Larrabee. He’ll think



I'm nuts, but Janie could be right. What can we lose by trying? After all, if she's mistaken—and I wouldn't care to bet on it; she's been all over this county with your friend Edie Taylor's Audubon group—I could still duck that vote on Monday, and protect Bill against these hoods. And after that," he said savagely, "deal with Big Ed Corey!"

But Janie was right on target. The police, closing in stealthily under the guidance of a veteran sheriff, surprised Bill and two sheepish guards in a ruined cabin. It was in thick brush at the edge of a pond—with tules, naturally, and redwings that filled the air with liquid chirping.

"The two punks don't even know who hired them," the Chief told Mr. Sanford later that day. "He was disguised then, and while taking the kid down on tape. All they can give me," he added in disgust, "is that the guy stank of rye bread. They must think I'm simple-minded!"

Mr. Sanford's jaw sagged; he looked at his wife, whose eyes were saucers. Janie squeaked, then began

to giggle louder than redwings.

"What do you know!" her father exclaimed. "The Mayor!"

"Wha-a-a-t?" Sheriff Thompson gulped.

It turned out later that Mayor Leavitt was in a bad financial bind, and had sold out for a good price. With Sanford abstaining, his deciding vote could have killed the park.

Janie missed her brother's triumph at the concert hall, but that couldn't be helped. The moths began to emerge from their cocoons, and as she told her parents in tragic tones, "You wouldn't want those poor little things to be born with just *nobody* at all around!"

"No, I couldn't live with that on my conscience," Sanford said solemnly. He led his wife to the door; it would be a miracle if they made the overture now. "At least," he said in a stage whisper that made his daughter redden, "she's not the Compleat Coldblooded Scientist at eleven." Then he added, aloud, "A Happy Mother's Day, Janie!"



Perchance the avid collector of diverse, maleficent armament will be mortified to learn herein his exhibit is—I trust—doomed to deficiency.

BERTRAND KEDSEN—alias Bart Johnson, alias Sandy Banes, alias small-time hoodlum—did not realize how rapidly the time had slipped by until he stepped from the edge of



The PERFECT ANGLE

the woods to the rim of the wide lake and saw how low the sun lay in the western sky.

He looked at his wristwatch. Six o'clock. That meant that he had been ambling through the woods for more than four hours, lost in thought, searching for a new angle. There were only about two hours of sunlight left. He would have to retrace his steps rapidly if he wanted to get back to the cabin before the woodland darkness began to make the way hazardous.

He made a quick orientation with the sun, stepped back into the woods, and began walking rapidly

northward, his sneakers nearly soundless on the thick matting of accumulated pine needles.

It was then that he heard the voice—or thought he did. He paused to listen. It came again, lilting and golden. It rose to a wistful note, hung there for a moment, then melted away into the nothingness of silence. Some camper with a radio, no doubt; or maybe there was a cabin nearby with a TV, or a recorder of some kind.

But when it came again, Kedsen knew the voice was not issuing

from any mechanical device. There was no musical background to it, and the song—if it were such—was certainly not designed for entertainment. It was more like the outpouring of a lost soul.

Curious, he began making his way toward it, pausing now and again to listen briefly. He climbed over several fallen trees, rounded a stand of brush, and found himself at the edge of a natural clearing.

He saw her instantly. Clad in red blouse and shorts, she was seated on a log at the opposite side of the little glade, her head back, her voice lifted to the blue sky above. She had a comb in her hand, and her hair lay back over one bare shoulder, a capricious ray of sunlight turning it into a shower of golden filaments. She had quit singing now and was looking directly at him, her red lips parted over strong, even teeth in a welcoming smile.

Kedsen had not been looking forward to his enforced stay at the cabin with any pleasurable feelings; at best, it could be but a boring and lonely two weeks. Now, suddenly, the picture had brightened. Women had never paid him much attention in his life, but a lone, friendly woman in the woods—well?

He strode forward, nerves tingling. "I'm . . ." He considered whether or not he should use his

right name. ". . . Bert Kedsen," he said, the name seeming to come out on its own accord.

"I'm Carol Wentfield," she said, tossing her hair back as she looked up at him.

Carol Wentfield! The name rang a bell. He had seen her picture in the papers several times—Society; a deb not too long ago. A car accident? Something. Carol Wentfield—of the *oil* Wentfields!

The pictures in the papers hadn't done her justice. He found himself staring down into the biggest eyes of the brightest blue he had ever seen. He ran his hand nervously over his sparse, sandy hair, feeling awkward and definitely out of class.

"I'm being held here a prisoner!" Her voice was husky and scarcely audible. "Please take me away!"

Kedsen felt his Adam's apple stick in his throat as he tried to swallow. This was too much! Or was she kidding him? Playing some kind of game? His gaze swept hurriedly about the clearing, then back to her again. Certainly there was no mistaking the seriousness in her eyes. And, yet. . . .

"Yes," she said, suddenly, her voice loud and clear, "it is a beautiful day! And it is so pleasant here among the trees!" The look of fear which had been upon her face had washed away, but the haunt of it was still in her eyes as she gazed

meaningfully above and past him.

Kedsen turned to see a short, stocky man striding toward them from one side of the clearing. His face was square and brown, topped by close-cropped hair that rivaled

his eyes in blackness. He wore a gun belt around his waist, the gun in its leather holster hanging low over one hip, western style.

"Mr. Kedsen," said Carol, as the man stopped before them, "this is



Mike Jeffries, a—a friend of mine.”

Kedsen acknowledged the introduction with a short nod and an extended hand. The hand was ignored. Jeffries stood with his own hands on his hips, his heavy brows drawn down as if waiting further information.

“I—I was just walking through the woods,” said Kedsen. “I—I lost my way.”

“The road is over there,” said Jeffries, indicating the direction with a nod of his head.

“Thanks,” said Kedsen. He felt awkward and ill at ease, but he made no move to go. Thoughts were tumbling rapidly through his head. The girl had asked him for help, and the big man called Jeffries certainly looked more like a jailer than he did a friend. Never in his life had Bert Kedsen felt like an errant knight on a white horse, and he had always made a point of staying out of other peoples’ troubles—especially if one of the people happened to be a heavy carrying a gun. Involuntarily, his eyes strayed again to the weapon.

“Been getting in a little target practice,” said the man, as if he felt that some kind of explanation might be in order.

Liars! thought Kedsen. *If he’d fired that cannon any time during the last two hours, I’d have heard it!*

Yes, there was definitely some-

thing wrong here. Carol Wentfield—probably had a million or so in her own right. If this were a kidnapping, there’d be money involved. Big money! And he had stumbled right into the middle of things. He needed time to think, time to figure an angle.

“Well, thanks,” he said again. “Glad to have met you.” He turned away in the direction Jeffries had indicated the road to be, but not before he had read once more the fearful, pleading look in the girl’s eyes.

Kedsen had not taken more than a few steps before he nearly collided with a tall man just emerging from a pathway behind a fringe of bushes. The tall man wore thick, horn-rimmed glasses and a crinkly Vandyke beard which hid most of the lower half of his face.

“Doctor Priceton,” came Carol’s voice, “this is Mr. Kedsen. He—he seems to have lost his way.”

“I see,” said Doctor Priceton. He extended his hand, and Kedsen felt thin fingers of steel clamp about his own. “I thought I heard voices.” His gaze shifted to a point beyond Kedsen, as if to pick up any message Jeffries might want to flash toward him. His eyes, oddly magnified behind the thick lenses, came back to Kedsen again, and he released the hand. “Are you from around here?” he asked, con-

versationally, not inquisitively.

Kedsen was about to tell him that he was staying in a cabin farther up the lake shore, but decided against it. He didn't know yet what he had gotten into, and he didn't want them to think that he wouldn't be missed if something happened to him.

"Just passing through," he said. "My car broke down just out of Lakeside. It won't be fixed until sometime tomorrow, and I was just out stretching my legs a bit. My traveling companions and I are staying at a motel," he added as an extra precautionary measure.

"I see," said Dr. Priceton. "Well, I guess I can get you back on the right track. Just follow me."

He turned back into the path again, and Kedsen trudged after him, trying to keep pace with the man's long strides.

In a moment or two, the brush gave way to stately pines. A cabin appeared at one side of a small clearing, almost hidden in deep shadows. Priceton strode directly toward it. "Come in," he said, over his shoulder. "You must be thirsty after your long walk."

Kedsen would have hesitated, but he couldn't find a ready excuse. Anyway, this might be a good chance to find out what the game was here, why Carol Wentfield wanted to get away. Maybe he

could work out an angle of some kind. If the thing turned out to be too big for him, he could always get in touch with Roscoe and Collin. The three of them had agreed to separate and to drop out of sight for a few weeks until certain men on the side of law and order had relaxed their quest for three men involved in a recent tavern heist, a highly disappointing play that had netted a mere eight hundred dollars. But the boys would come on the run—if the stakes happened to be high enough to compensate for the risk.

One long room took up half of the cabin space. It was a combination kitchenette, dining room, and lounging room. Priceton indicated a chair beside a small table near a wide picture window, and Kedsen eased himself into it while the doctor continued on toward the refrigerator in the kitchenette. A quick survey showed two doors leading from the main room into other rooms. One of the doors stood open, revealing a bedroom that was obviously the sleeping quarters for the two men. The other door was closed, and a padlock hung listlessly from its hasp on the frame.

There was no doubt in Kedsen's mind now but that the girl was being held here against her will. She was probably kept under strict surveillance every hour of the day

by the baboon called Jeffries, then locked securely in her room for the night.

Priceton returned with two opened cans of beer, handed one to Kedsen, and raised the other in salute. He took a long drink, then sat down in the chair at the opposite side of the table, stretching his long legs out comfortably before him. He inspected his sweating can of beer for a moment, then turned to face Kedsen. "I suppose you have been wondering what is taking place here," he said, his eyes distorted behind their glasses. "Perhaps I should explain."

Kedsen took a drink of beer and remained silent, waiting.

"Do you know anything at all about Miss Wentfield?" Priceton asked.

Kedsen shrugged. "I've seen her picture in the papers a few times."

Priceton nodded. "Goes in for most kinds of sports—tennis, golf, horses, swimming, and so forth—the athletic type. And, besides, she is quite photogenic." He paused for a moment, then went on. "Her father, J. T. Wentfield, was killed in a car accident ten days ago. Supposedly, Carol was doing the driving. Now there are only two members of the family left—Carol and her brother, Robert."

Kedsen remembered having read about the accident. It had made

the headlines, of course. Old J.T.'s millions were to go to the only two heirs: Carol, the sports-loving daughter, and Robert, the skirt-loving son. A picture began to take vague shape in Kedsen's brain.

"Carol is a very sick girl," Priceton continued. "Not physically, of course; mentally. Bluntly, she is a paranoiac with tendencies toward schizophrenia. In other words, she has delusions of persecution and an occasional disorientation of personality which leads her to commit acts of extreme violence."

The words didn't mean much to Kedsen, and they flowed as if they had been memorized from a book. "You mean a sort of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde personality."

Priceton nodded. "In a way, yes. Most of the time she is her own normal self, but there are times when she simply goes off the deep end, becomes dangerous. And since her father's—er—accident, she has been quite a bit worse."

"I should think," said Kedsen, "that a sanitarium would be the proper place for her."

Priceton shook his head. "Not at all. She gets the best possible care here. You see, besides being a man of medicine, I am also a psychiatrist and have been hired to give her my undivided attention. She is on a healthful diet, spends her leisure hours walking through the woods or

swimming in the lake, and I have a quiet therapeutic session with her each afternoon. We keep her pleasantly relaxed by sedation during the day and give her a mild somnifacient at bedtime. We feel that we are making remarkable progress with her, and I am certain we can effect a complete cure, given time enough." Priceton paused and took another drink.

The picture in Kedsen's brain was becoming clearer. This was just a high-class kidnapping under an assumed name. Under the guise of trying to cure the girl, they were deliberately attempting to drive her insane. They had taken her away from all contact with the outer world. Jeffries, with gun on hip, hounded her whenever she left the cabin. Priceton, with his drugs and sessions, probably kept her in a constant state of mental confusion. Then the final locked door at night. Kedsen guessed that the windows of her room were also secured, probably barred in some manner. But what was the angle? Where was the payoff?

"There are several more reasons why we chose this cottage rather than a sanitarium," Priceton went on. "First, of course, is the family name. The Wentfields, like most leading families, have—well, a certain inherent pride, we might say. Second, we felt that the environ-

ment of an institution—the staff doctors, attendants, nurses, confinement, restrictions, and all—might tend to aggravate her condition rather than to remedy it. Her brother, Robert, is sparing no expense to bring about her recovery. Naturally, he is deeply concerned."

"Yes," said Kedsen, "I can see that he would be."

And there was the payoff! Brother Robert! Control of his sister's share of the inheritance would give him a few extra million to play around with. It was as simple as that!

A glance through the window showed him that the shadows of evening had deepened considerably. The shortcut through the woods was now impossible. He would have to follow the road through Lakeside, a hike of six or seven miles. He finished off the beer and set the empty on the table. "I had best be going, he said, abruptly. "My—my friends will be wondering what happened to me."

He was half out of his chair when Priceton laid a restraining hand on his arm. "Just a minute," said the doctor. "I haven't quite made my point yet."

Kedsen sank back into the chair again, his nerves tingling, his senses alert to what might be coming his way, now that he had heard the story.

Priceton drew back his hand and

leaned forward. "Except for Robert Wentfield and us here at the cabin, no one knows where Carol is. Needless to say, she is top news at the moment. If her whereabouts became known, this cottage would be surrounded by a horde of reporters and photographers in less than twenty-four hours. You can see what that would do to us. We would be forced to give up our retreat and to seek another sanctuary. I have explained the circumstances to you with the hope that you, as a gentleman, would respect our delicate situation here and, upon leaving, forget that you had ever seen Carol Wentfield."

Kedsen felt relief flood through him. "Oh, sure, Doc!" he said, getting to his feet again and forcing a friendly smile to his lips. "Sure! As far as I'm concerned, I've already forgotten the whole thing."

He shook hands with Priceton and was about to leave when Carol came in, Jeffries a scant pace behind her. They walked directly toward the kitchenette, Kedsen's eyes riveted upon the hip action beneath the red shorts. She was tall, athletic, superbly shaped, and beautiful—and worth ten times her weight in gold!

"I believe it is time for Carol's nightcap," said Priceton, his voice silken, almost hypnotic, in its smoothness.

Carol took the pills and the glass of milk Jeffries handed her. As she tilted her head back to swallow, Kedsen once again felt her eyes upon him and caught their pleading look. Scarcely knowing that he did so, he gave an almost imperceptible nod of understanding and promise.

Declining the offer of a ride on the pretext that he needed the exercise, Kedsen struck out on foot along the narrow road that led to Lakeside a mile and a half away; his brain busy. By the time he reached the little resort town, darkness had begun to fill the sky, and the street lights were aglow, but no worthwhile idea had presented itself. Once he had thought of demanding money from Priceton to insure his silence, but had dismissed the idea almost instantly. Priceton would merely laugh at him, put Carol and Jeffries in his car, and take off for parts unknown.

There seemed to be but one answer—he would have a talk with the girl herself. That she had money, or the means of getting it, was beyond doubt. A lot depended upon how much she was willing to pay for her freedom or for him to contact the right people. He would talk with her this very night, then play it by ear from there. If she didn't want to pay enough—well, he hadn't lost anything. He would go back to his cabin and forget the

whole thing. He'd play it by ear,

Kedsen purchased a small flashlight, spent a long hour over a beer and sandwich, took a leisurely stroll through the tourist-filled streets, then went to a tavern and nursed a couple of bottles of beer through the late show on TV.

It was well after two o'clock in the morning when he reached the little lane which led directly to the cabin beneath the pines. He entered the blackness of the lane slowly and silently, memory of Jeffries' gun lending him extra caution.

The bulk of the cabin loomed suddenly before him, and he felt his way along it to his left, keeping well away from the corner room where he hoped the two men were soundly sleeping. Minutes later, trailing his fingers along the peeled logs of the wall, he contacted a grill of steel wire. Yes, her window was barred against escape just as he had suspected.

He put his ear to the grill and heard the faint sound of even breathing. "Carol," he whispered. "Carol." There was no answer. He put his flashlight to the window and snapped it on, careful to guide its beam by a cupped head. She was lying on a bed a few feet away, her long legs only partly covered by a scant, lacy garment that clung revealingly to her every contour. He let the light travel slowly along

her body to shine, finally, directly upon her face. Her eyelids fluttered, then popped open, and she threw up a bare arm against the glare. He turned off the flash and whispered her name again.

She was at the window in an instant, her face scarcely visible behind the mesh. "I hoped you would come," she said. "I knew you would come! You've got to take me away from here! You've got to hide me!" She seemed on the verge of hysteria. "You don't know what they are trying to do to me—"

"Shhh," he cautioned.

She let her voice drop to a harsh whisper, her face pressed against the grill. "They're trying to get my money. They're trying to—drive me insane. You've got to get me out of here."

Kedsen smiled into the night. He had found the right angle. She was ready to pay plenty! "Well," he said, hesitantly, "I might be able to fix the window so you could get out." His hand had been exploring the grill and had found that its frame was secured to the outside wall by hasp and padlock. "But, of course, I would be taking a risk. . . ."

"It's not enough just to let me out," she said quickly. "I couldn't get anywhere by myself. I'm too well-known. I'd be found in no

time. You must take me away, hide me somewhere!"

"That would be even a greater risk," he said. "I might find myself faced with a charge of kidnapping."

"I'll pay you well! I'll give you—*anything!*"

He could feel her hot breath on his face. "A kidnapping rap in this state is really something," he said.

"But I'd be going willingly!" she pleaded.

"Going willingly is one thing," he hedged. "But for me to break open a window for you to do so might be something else—especially if you should decide to change your mind later on."

"But I wouldn't. . . ." The voice ended in a sob.

Kedsen remained silent, waiting. It wouldn't hurt for her to stew awhile, let the price go up.

With an effort, she seemed to gain a measure of control. "We—we could—could get married," she whispered.

Kedsen felt a chill hit the short hairs at the back of his neck and go racing down through the length of his body to tingle the very ends of his toes. "Married!" The word was scarcely more than a croak.

"That way, they couldn't force me to come back. And—and you would be safe, too."

Kedsen felt that his mouth had gone dry and sticky. Married! He,

Bertrand Kedsen, married to Carol Wentfield! *The Carol Wentfield!*

"We could get an annulment later. After—after I got my share of the money."

He could see the oval of her face quite plainly now and realized suddenly that the light of dawn must be spreading rapidly through the sky, creeping down through the trees. He ran his tongue over dry lips. "Yes," he said, hurriedly. "Yes." He clutched the wires of the mesh and put his face close to hers. Here was the perfect angle! And it had been dropped right into his lap. "Listen now! Listen carefully! Act exactly the same today as always. Don't do anything to make them suspicious. When they give you the sleeping pills, put them under your tongue. Don't swallow them. Then wait till you hear me at the window."

Kedsen took the shortcut through the woods and arrived at his cabin an hour after sunrise, dog-tired and red-eyed from his exertions and lack of sleep. He spent most of the day stretched out on the cot, drinking beer and napping, and the rest of the day in packing his few belongings and in getting the convertible into top running order. Several times, his elation broke all bounds, and he laughed long and loud. "Annulment! Annulment, hell! Mister Bertrand Kedsen—multi-

millionaire! Wentfield millions!"

He was back at Carol's window shortly after midnight, gun in hand, just in case something had gone wrong. He listened for a moment, his heart thumping against his ribs, then whispered her name.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, I'm ready."

He returned the flat automatic to his hip pocket, took a screwdriver from his jacket pocket, and set to work. Just four little screws between him and a life of luxury! They came out easily, and he let them fall to his feet, one by one. Then he swung the grill slowly and carefully back on its hinges.

Minutes later, they were running down the road toward the waiting car, her hand warm and vibrant in his own. Then, side by side in the front seat, they went spinning away through the night.

"At last!" she said, taking his right arm in both of hers and leaning her head against his shoulder. "Free at last! Wonderful!"

They passed through the edge of Lakeside, picked up the main highway, and he let the car glide along at an even sixty. He could tell by her relaxed position against him and her even breathing that she had already fallen asleep. She had probably been sitting on the edge of her bed, tense and wide awake, waiting through the long hours for him. He let his right arm slide down

from the wheel lest its motion of guiding disturb her, let his hand fall idly upon her knee and rest there.

He had always envied, and hated, rich people—their fine cars, yachts, trips to Europe, expensive hotels. And now, within a matter of hours, he would be one of them. He laughed silently to the stars above.

Dawn light began to spread through the skies, and he realized that his right arm, lying motionless for so long, was beginning to cramp. He moved it slowly up to the wheel again, flexing his fingers against their numbness.

She stirred into wakefulness then and looked up at him. She edged closer, put her arm about his shoulders, and he could feel her breath hot against his neck.

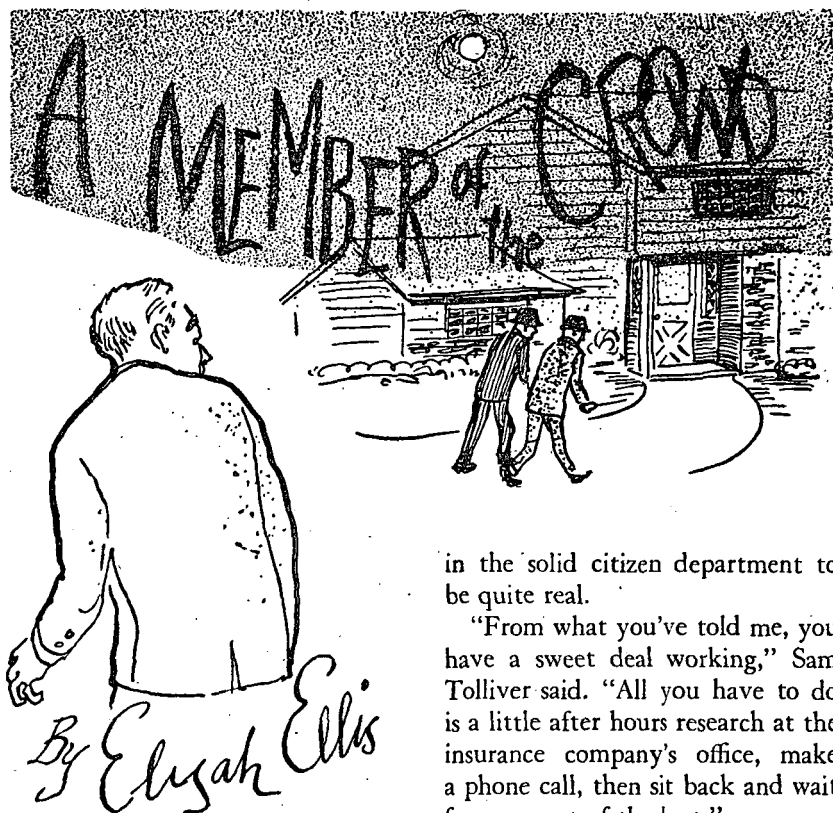
There was a roadside park just ahead and a fringe of trees. They wouldn't miss her until seven or eight o'clock. There was time. Plenty of time.

He eased the car into the park, let it roll to a stop behind the fringe of trees, and cut the engine.

She rolled toward him instantly. He put his arm about her waist, felt the tenseness of her body against the tenseness of his own and threw his head back against the seat to laugh into the first rays of sunlight.

It was then that she sank her strong white teeth into his throat.

Supposedly, a person finds security in social acceptance, yet the attendant boredom often incites him to abandon the conformity of the crowd.



At first Sam Tolliver felt only a weary disgust, seasoned with a perverse spark of satisfaction. He'd always thought his brother-in-law, Arnold Banks, was a little too strong

in the solid citizen department to be quite real.

"From what you've told me, you have a sweet deal working," Sam Tolliver said. "All you have to do is a little after hours research at the insurance company's office, make a phone call, then sit back and wait for your cut of the loot."

Banks mopped sweat from his well-fed face. "It sounds lousy, when you put it like that."

"It's lousy any way you put it," Tolliver sighed. "But what's your

problem? What's bugging you?"

"They—these two guys—won't let me out. They want more names, bigger scores, as they call it. They don't seem to understand the risks I take."

Tolliver gave a sharp bark of laughter. "What did you expect? You've given these hoods a direct line to the big-time. They'll squeeze you till you burst like a rotten apple."

"Yeah, I know I was a fool," Banks muttered, "to risk all this, but—"

"But you didn't think there'd be any risk," Tolliver said sardonically. "Just stay at the office once or twice a week after everyone else had left, do a fast run-through on the files, and pick out the names of a couple of clients who have heavy policies with your company on their jewels and other little tidbits."

Banks got up, paced distractedly about the room. "It wasn't like these people couldn't afford the loss. Besides, they were insured. It wasn't like sticking up a bank with a gun, or—"

"Sure, Arnie, sure. But now you want out, your pals won't let you out, and what happens next?"

Banks turned toward him. "What can I do, Sam? That's why I called you over here tonight. You know about this kind of thing. You can help me."

For a moment Tolliver didn't speak. Then, with a glance at his watch, he rose to his feet. "Don't try pressuring me, Arnie. You've got enough trouble as it is," he said, coldly.

"I didn't mean—I would never tell anyone—"

Tolliver started for the front door, then hesitated, looking back. "Arnie, have you told your wife about this mess? Anyone?"

"No. Of course not."

"Well, when she gets home tonight, tell her. Then go to your boss at the insurance company. Lay it out for him. It'll be rough, but if you help nail these two hoods—"

"I can't do that. It'd ruin me. With an insurance salesman, everything depends on his reputation. If that goes, he's through. And what about Jeanne? The kids?"

Tolliver's gaze hardened. "You should've thought of all that before, and stuck to selling policies, not information."

"I didn't have any idea it would go this far." Banks gave a choked whinny that was half-laugh, half-sob. "Just a couple of times, and that was supposed to be the end of it."

"Sure," Tolliver said. He opened the door. "Face up to it, Arnie. You can always get a job digging ditches."

Banks didn't answer as Tolliver went out and pulled the door firmly shut behind him. He stepped off the porch and cut across the patch of lawn toward the sidewalk, muttering to himself, "Look who's telling people to face up to their problems and tough it out."

The advice was good, even if the source wasn't.

He reached the walk and turned along it, but hadn't gone far when he heard a car door thud shut. He glanced around and saw two men emerge from the shadows beneath the trees that lined the street. They went briskly up the walk to the Banks house. They reached the porch, and one of them punched the doorbell.

Tolliver stopped in the shadows to watch.

The door opened and Banks appeared. He gave a sharp cry, "You! What the—"

The two men hustled him inside and the door shut.

Whoever the men were, and whatever they wanted, were none of Tolliver's business. He wanted no part of the sordid mess his brother-in-law had got himself into.

For five years Sam Tolliver had lived by one rule: never to get involved in anything, never be more than just another member of the passing crowd. He liked it that way. Forget Arnold Banks, with his big

smile, his glad hand—and larcenous heart.

Yet Tolliver stepped off the concrete walk and ran silently across the intervening stretch of lawn to the side of Banks' house. There was a narrow, vertical strip of light where the drapes did not quite meet inside the picture window. By pressing his face to the glass, Tolliver could see most of the livingroom through the opening.

He could hear, "I tell you, my wife will be home any minute." That was Banks. His voice was shrill with anger.

The three men were standing near the center of the room. The one who had just spoken was tall and lean, with graying brown hair above a sloped forehead, a jutting nose, and an undershot jaw.

Banks said, "I'm not going to do it, Kane. We made a deal. I'd furnish you the names and addresses of six people who were likely to have valuable stuff in their homes. All right, I've given them to you. That's it." His voice got away from him, grew shrill again. "You promised—"

"You know what a liar I am," the lean man chuckled. "You should remember from the old days, when we were in school together. I was always the best liar around, as well as other things I was good at."

Now his companion stirred im-

patiently. This one was as tall as the first, but much heavier. He had a meaty, battered face, looked like an ex-boxer who'd taken several punches too many. He growled, "Tell him how it's goin' to be, Frank, and let's get out of here."

The lean man, Frank Kane, said chidingly, "Arnold knows how it's going to be, Garro; just like before. You be a good boy, Arnold. You'll get your cut, and Garro and me will take all the risks."

"You don't understand," Banks said. "All these burglaries, all clients of the company I work for—before long someone is going to make the connection, realize that the burglars are getting inside info—"

"Yes, but by then we'll all be rich," Kane broke in. He stuck his head forward on his skinny neck, grinning at Banks, obviously enjoying this. "Sure, sooner or later maybe your boss will tumble to you, Arnold, but what's a couple years in prison? Do you good. Get some of that fat off you."

Banks clutched his head between his hands. "I can't—"

"Don't make me unhappy," Kane said. "All kinds of things happen to people who make me unhappy—and to their wives, not to mention their daughters."

Garro giggled and licked his thick lips.

Banks suddenly wilted. "All right.

Anything. Just get out," he begged.

"Of course," Kane said. "I'll be waiting for your call, and, Arnold, don't get wild ideas. Please? You might get me and Garro busted if you went to the cops. But the neighborhood we live in, Arnold, you'd be surprised how many friends we have down there, and what they'd do for us."

"Get out," Banks said hoarsely. He backed away as the two men strolled toward the door. They passed out of Tolliver's line of vision.

Kane said, "Just accept it, Arnold. Take your cut of the money, and have a ball."

Tolliver heard the door open and shut. He crouched beneath the window, looking along the side of the house toward the front.

Kane and the lumbering Garro took their time strolling down the moonlit walk. Garro was grumbling, "I'd still like to know about that guy we seen leaving here."

"To heck with him," Kane said. He chuckled. "Man, what a setup, what a sweet setup!"

Tolliver waited until the men had got into their car and driven away. Then he pushed to his feet. There was no sound from the house as he picked his way across the lawn. He headed for home, walking slowly, taking deep breaths of the warm night air. He tried to blot out what

he'd seen and heard, obliterate it.

The thing to remember was that it had nothing to do with him. His wife, Mary, was going to be hurt when the mess came to light, as it was bound to do, sooner or later, but Mary would get over it.

That brother of hers, though, with a wife, two kids, a reasonably good job selling insurance and prospects of moving up in a few years, had to chance it all, for the sake of a few thousand bucks that he wouldn't have to report on his income-tax!

As Tolliver understood it, Frank Kane and Banks had run with the same bunch when they were kids, at least until—as Banks had put it—Kane started “going bad.” Now, all these years later, here was Kane again. From an “accidental” meeting on a downtown street, a couple of drinks in a bar while they cut up old touches, one thing had lead to another.

Well, Banks had asked for it. Let him have it, just so long as he left Sam Tolliver and Mary alone.

Tolliver turned the corner into his own street. Ahead he could see the warm glow from the windows of his own house, in the middle of the block. He quickened his steps.

Mary was curled up half-asleep in a chair in the livingroom when he came in. The television was on. He switched it off, stepped over

and bent to kiss Mary on the top of her smooth blonde head.

“What did Arnie want?” she asked, smothering a yawn.

Tolliver went out to the kitchen to get a beer. “Just to shoot the breeze awhile.”

“He wasn't trying to talk you into some big deal, was he?”

Tolliver came back, carrying a can of beer. “No.”

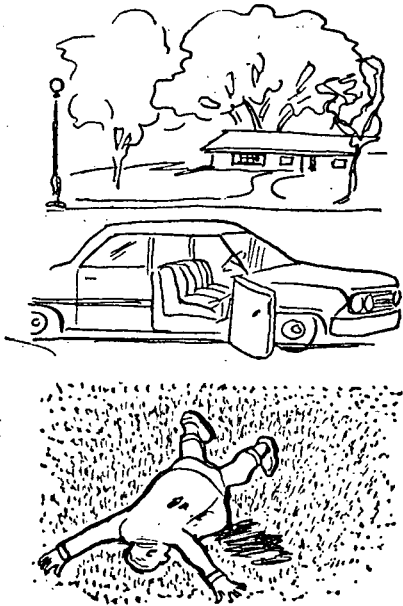
“Him and his big deals,” Mary said. She chuckled. “Poor Arnie, always looking for the proverbial pot o' gold.”

“Yeah.” Tolliver took a drink of beer. “Poor Arnie.”

The following evening, Saturday, Arnold Banks was found sprawled on the front lawn of his home, near the curb. He'd been shot twice in the back, from close range. He was quite dead.

His wife told police he'd spent the afternoon and early evening at the insurance company offices, catching up on his work. He'd called her at home around eight o'clock to tell her he was just leaving, and that he had something important to discuss with her. She had no idea what he was talking about, and he didn't get a chance to tell her.

Banks' car was at the curb, the right front door standing open. It looked as if he'd known he was being followed, and had left his



car and started running for his house, but he hadn't run fast enough.

Several people, including his wife and two daughters, had heard the shots at roughly eight-fifteen, but everyone had thought it was just backfires from a passing car. No one had seen or heard anything else, until Banks' youngest daughter had gone out on the front porch, noticed the car at the curb and went to investigate.

By noon of the next day Sam Tolliver was quietly but thoroughly drunk, alone. Mary had gone over to be with Jeanne Banks and the two girls.

"What could I have done?" he asked the silence. "Nothing, that's what."

Sure, he was sorry about Arnie. He wondered what had happened. Probably Arnie had called Frank Kane to give him the names of a couple more policy holders who were likely to have items in their homes worth stealing. Then Arnie had changed his mind, or had finally made up his mind and told Kane where he could go. Then, instead of calling the cops, he'd tried to get home to tell his wife about the mess he was in, before doing anything else. But Kane and his pal, Garro, had been too quick for him.

"The stupid slob," Tolliver muttered. At least it was over now, and with any kind of luck there would never be any suspicion that the dead man had been mixed up with a pair of thieves.

Only, now they were killers, Frank Kane and that moron, Garro. What about them?

Well, they'd get what they had coming. If not for this job, then for another. Sooner or later they'd get it. Hoods always did. Didn't they?

All right, then, somehow he'd tip off the cops. A quick phone call from a booth in a distant part of the city, or maybe an anonymous letter, would fix everything.

It had been about sixteen hours

since the killing. By now the cops would have received, say, ten anonymous tips, naming ten different individuals as the killers. At least half a dozen psychos would have wandered in off the street to "confess" to the murder.

One more anonymous tip would get all kinds of attention. Sure it would. Tolliver decided what he was going to do—exactly nothing.

Sam Tolliver had been born just five years ago, the day he drove into this city in his old jalopy with a single suitcase in the backseat. He'd had at least a good idea of what happiness was all about for a little over two years, since he'd met and married Mary Banks.

Sure, Mary knew where he came from and why. He'd told her before they were married, and it hadn't made any difference. Not to her, not then, but she had let it slip to her brother. They were the only two people within two thousand miles who knew.

If, suddenly, everybody knew, that would be something else—especially the way it would come out, if he went to the cops and blew the whistle on Kane and Garro. There would be a trial. There would be a defense lawyer, and he could imagine the kind of lawyer Kane would hire. There would be Sam Tolliver, star witness for the State. And the defense attorney

probing, digging, never easing up—

"No," Tolliver snarled. He liked the obscure nook he'd found, and he loved his wife, and nothing was going to destroy it; nothing.

The next morning he went to work as usual. He'd work till noon, then take off the rest of the day. Banks' funeral was scheduled for mid-afternoon.

He was working at the linotype when the back-shop boss came along the aisle and tapped his shoulder. "Phone, Sam."

Tolliver nodded. Probably it was Mary, wanting something.

But it wasn't. It was a police lieutenant named Hanson. "Don't be alarmed," he said. "Nothing to worry about. It's just that we received a rather curious—but it would be better to discuss it here at headquarters."

It was only a few blocks from the newspaper offices to the civic-center complex which housed the police department, but Tolliver had plenty of time to worry. Lt. Hanson over the phone had given him no further information, just made it clear he expected to see Tolliver immediately.

Tolliver found the lieutenant in a cubbyhole office on the second floor of the building. Hanson was a pleasant-looking man about Tolliver's age, thirty-five. He nodded Tolliver to a chair facing his desk

and said, "Good of you to come in so—promptly."

"What's this all about?" Tolliver asked.

Silently, Hanson took an envelope from the top of his desk and passed it to Tolliver. Then he murmured, "That came in the mail this morning. Read it, please."

Tolliver fumbled the enclosure from the envelope. It was a single sheet of paper, bearing the letterhead of the insurance company for which Arnold Banks had worked.

The message scrawled in pencil on the paper was short: "Get in touch with Sam Tolliver, 1834 Macklin St. Ask him about Friday night." The signature jumped up and hit Tolliver between the eyes: "Arnold Banks."

When he could hear again, Hanson was saying, "It was mailed sometime Saturday afternoon. Considering what happened that evening, you'll understand why we're a bit curious about it, especially when we compared fingerprints taken from the letter with those of Arnold Banks and found they matched."

The lieutenant stopped. His face was a polite mask, but his eyes were boring holes in Tolliver.

"I don't—I don't understand," Tolliver said finally. He forced himself to meet the lieutenant's gaze. "I guess Arnie was just trying to

make a little joke of some kind."

Hanson looked sympathetic. "Really? Not a very funny joke, is it? What about Friday night, Tolliver?"

"Nothing about it," Tolliver said. "I went over to see him. We talked awhile—"

Lt. Hanson raised a palm. "Before you dig a hole you can't get out of, Tolliver, let me tell you something. We have been working with the insurance company for the last week or so, very quietly and discreetly, of course. There have been a series of burglaries lately, all of them involving victims insured by that particular company. We'd figured out that the thieves were getting information from someone in the company, and had narrowed it down to about four possible suspects. Banks was one of them."

Tolliver managed to keep his hands steady as he lit a cigarette. He inhaled deeply. "All right. My brother-in-law told me, Friday night. I didn't take him seriously. He just kind of mentioned it in passing, that he was in a jam, but thought he could get out of it."

Hanson leaned back in his chair, stared up at the ceiling. "Who were the thieves he was working with?"

"He didn't tell me. Like I say, I didn't really take it too seriously. He didn't tell me any details at all."

More silence. Then the lieutenant

brought his gaze down from the ceiling, examined Tolliver with mild blue eyes. "And I suppose he sent this letter, just in case something—unexpected—should happen to him, before he got around to confessing his connection with these burglaries to his boss, or whatever he intended to do, to get the matter cleaned up." There was a slight hint of sarcasm in Hanson's voice.

Tolliver moved around restlessly in his chair. "I suppose so. I told you, I don't know anything about it."

"Yes, you told me. You're positive he didn't mention any names?" Hanson grimaced. "Too bad. Well, I won't keep you any longer—this time."

Tolliver got up uncertainly.

"If you should happen to think of anything, give me a call," Hanson said pleasantly.

Tolliver nodded. He wasted no time getting out of there, and Lt. Hanson wasted no time picking up his phone and punching a button which would connect him with the department's records and identification bureau.

Somehow, Tolliver got through the rest of the day. He didn't enjoy any of it. The funeral was as bad as he'd expected it to be, and always, gnawing at him, was the thought of the interview with Lt. Hanson. Was the cop satisfied, or wasn't he?

Tolliver could only sweat it out, and hope. By the time he and Mary finally got home, a little after five, he'd almost convinced himself that he was in the clear.

Mary was exhausted. She went into the bedroom and was soon asleep. She'd taken her brother's death as well as anyone could. Tolliver prayed that she wouldn't have to take anymore.

He poured a drink in the living-room, took the glass and went to stand at the front windows. A nondescript gray sedan idled past. Tolliver glanced at his own car, which he'd left in the driveway. He should run it on into the garage as he and Mary wouldn't be going out again tonight. He'd finish his drink first. Slowly he began to relax, and hardly noticed as the gray sedan passed again, going in the other direction and at a greater speed.

He was nursing a second drink when the phone rang. He hurried to pick it up before its jangle awoke Mary. "Mr. Tolliver?" a vaguely familiar voice asked. "Got home from the funeral okay, I see. You've had a busy day."

"Who is this?"

"Very busy. You even made a trip to the police station this morning. What was that about, Mr. Tolliver?"

Tolliver's hand tightened around

the phone until his knuckles stood out white. He recognized the voice now.

"It was about some overdue parking tickets, if it's any of your business," he said harshly. "Who is this?"

"You wouldn't know the name. At least, I hope you wouldn't, for your sake. Just forget anything Arnold Banks might have told you last Friday night. Forget all about it, Mr. Tolliver."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"If you don't, there's no problem; but if you do, Mr. Tolliver, you have a pretty wife, little Mary. I have lots of friends, and one of them really does like well-stacked little blondes. Only thing he likes better is putting bulletholes in people."

Tolliver's heart pounded at his ribs. "Listen—"

There was a loud click. Frank Kane had hung up.

Tolliver put down the phone as if it were suddenly red hot. He doubled a fist and slammed it into the wall. He cursed aloud, raging.

"Sam, what's the matter?" Mary cried, behind him.

He wheeled, saw her standing in the bedroom doorway. Her hair was tousled and her eyes wide with fright.

Tolliver shook his head. "Noth-

ing. Some wise-guy reporter wanted a story. I lost my temper."

"I never saw you like that."

Tolliver went to her, put his arms around her. "Sorry, honey. I'm on edge—this lousy business."

"I know," Mary said, and gave a shaky laugh. "I've been jumping at shadows myself, ever since poor Arnie—"

The doorbell rang. They both jumped. Tolliver went to the door, eased it open a slit. Lt. Hanson stood on the front steps. Tolliver groaned.

"I want to talk to you," Hanson said. "Now."

"Who is it?" Mary called.

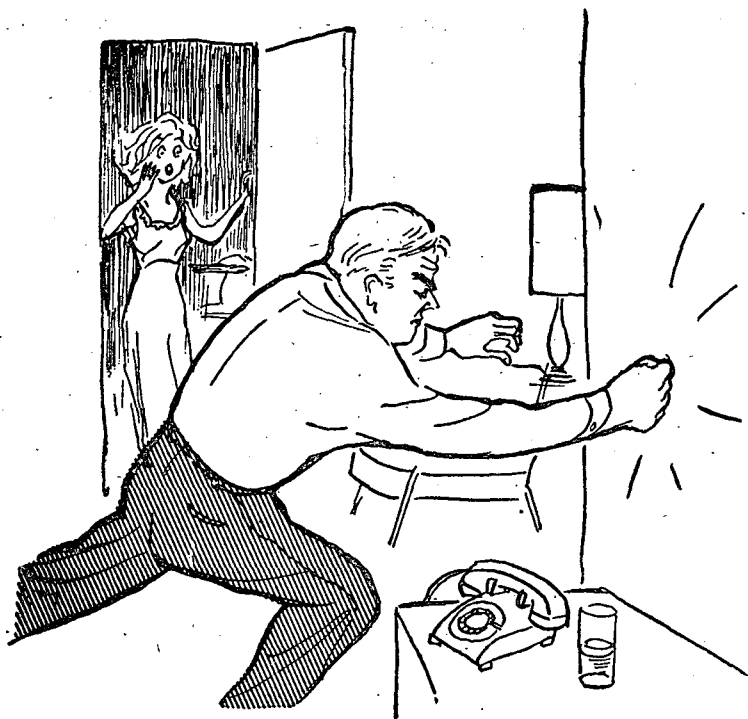
Tolliver said over his shoulder, "Guy from the office. I—we'll sit out in his car and talk. I'll be right back."

Before Mary could answer, he was out the door and had pulled it shut behind him.

Hanson smiled briefly. "You think fast, don't you? Lies to fit any occasion. Okay, we'll sit in my car."

Tolliver followed him to a plain black sedan at the curb in front of the house. They got inside. Tolliver waited.

"Well," Hanson said, "I checked you out, Tolliver. It wasn't hard, since you just stopped using your first name, John, as you did before you came here, and used your middle name, Samuel, instead. You



know the routine as well as I do."

Tolliver stared out at the gathering twilight. "Yeah, I know the routine," he said dully.

"John S. Tolliver," the lieutenant mused. "Full-time deputy on the sheriff's force in—"

"In a lousy town two thousand miles from here," Tolliver said bitterly. "All right, you've got me."

Hanson shook his head slowly. "From the information I received from the sheriff out there, you're the one that got it. One evening

you walked in on a liquor store heist. You shot and killed one of the robbers, and wounded the second. Both were armed and shooting at you—"

"And both were fourteen years old," Tolliver said wearily, "only I didn't stop to ask for their ID cards when they cut down on me." His face twisted in bitter memory.

The lieutenant nodded. "Uh huh. So you got charged with manslaughter, and, I gather, darned near got convicted."

"Yeah. The real problem was, I had a bad habit of stepping on the wrong toes in the county there. So when this came along—well, they didn't send me to prison, but they did everything else possible to get rid of me."

"So you packed your bag and ran," Hanson said. "Not that I blame you. It was a bum rap, all around."

"Okay, I ran—first one place and then another. I picked up the printing trade. I'd worked on the local newspaper when I was a kid, and it didn't take me long. Five years ago I settled here. I thought. . . ."

"You thought you could bury yourself," Hanson said. "I don't know. Maybe I'd do the same thing myself, in those circumstances. It's obvious why you don't want all this raked up again, but it has to be, Tolliver."

"What do you mean?" Tolliver snapped.

"I'm morally certain that Arnold Banks spilled the whole business to you the other night, including the names of the hoods he was dealing with in this stinking racket. I want those names."

Tolliver opened the car door, turned to slide out. Hanson stopped him.

"I'm not giving you much choice," the lieutenant said. "I

don't like it, but I've got to put the screws on you. The choice you've got is how the headlines are going to read in tomorrow morning's papers. 'Citizen Aids Police,' or 'Killer Implicated In—' "

"All right, all right," Tolliver snarled. He got out of the car. "Give me a couple minutes with my wife. Then I'll ride downtown with you."

"Make it fast, but don't try running again, Tolliver. You've run far enough."

Tolliver went up the walk. He glanced from side to side along the quiet, pleasant street. Well, it had been nice while it lasted.

Inside his house, Tolliver took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. He called, "Mary? You in the kitchen?"

No answer.

He crossed to the kitchen door and looked in. Mary was lying face down, between the stove and the back door. He rushed to her. Turning her over, he saw a thin trickle of blood on her chin. It came from her split lower lip. Her eyes fluttered open and she tried to sit up. Tolliver helped her, cursing under his breath.

"I'm all right," Mary said dazedly, but color was coming back into her cheeks. "I just—fainted, I guess."

Tolliver cursed some more, this

time with relief that Mary was OK.

"I was working there at the stove," Mary said. She dabbed at her lip, frowned at the spot of blood on her finger. "Cut it when I fell, I guess. Anyway, I looked toward the back door—and there was a man standing there, looking in through the screen."

With Tolliver's help she got up. She leaned against the table and pushed the hair back out of her eyes.

"Who was it, honey?" he asked.

"I never saw him before, a big, ugly man. He gave a sort of giggle and said, 'Tell Sam hello.' That's when I fainted. It was so—so unexpected."

Tolliver raked a hand over his wiry hair. Garro, he thought. The bums couldn't leave well enough alone. Kane had called, then sent Garro around to add another bit of warning. Tomorrow there would be something else.

Then he remembered—tomorrow they wouldn't have any doubt that Tolliver knew them, no doubt at all. Very likely the two of them would be in cells in an hour—all Tolliver had to do was go tell Lt. Hanson their names. And then what?

As Kane had told Arnold Banks, money can buy you a lot of friends, even from a jail cell. Friends quite willing to shut up, permanently,

witnesses who could put you in the electric chair. All it took was money, and Kane almost certainly had plenty of that.

Tolliver wasn't worried about himself. But what about his wife? Hide her away somewhere in a cage, with armed guards at the door? And for how long? Weeks, months, maybe even years?

Tolliver said slowly, "Mary, I want you to go in the livingroom and pour yourself a good strong drink. Sit down and enjoy it. Before long a guy named Hanson will be pounding at the door. He's a police lieutenant. Tell him I had to—go out for awhile."

"I don't understand," Mary said.

"You will, soon enough," Tolliver sighed. "Tell Hanson I'll call in as soon as I can. If he won't wait here for my call, you go with him. Stick to him like glue."

Before she could argue, he kissed her, gave her a gentle shove toward the livingroom. Then he left. Outside, he trotted across the backyard to the gate that opened onto the alley. It was getting darker, but not nearly dark enough if Hanson happened to be watching the back of the house. But no one tried to stop him as he followed the alley to its mouth on a side street.

He didn't have any idea where to start, where to look. All he knew for sure was that he had to find

Frank Kane, and find him fast.

He walked quickly along the side street to the corner of the next street over from his own. The traffic light was against him at the intersection. He stood impatiently waiting for it to change. He glanced around.

There was a drugstore a few feet away from him, on the near corner. He could see people in there at the fountain, drinking cokes, laughing it up.

How do you find two hoods in a city occupied by almost a quarter-of-a-million people? If he had time, a day or two, he could probably do it, but he didn't have even an hour or two. Suddenly he turned into the drugstore.

If he were going to act the fool, he might as well go all the way. He went back to the line of phone booths beyond the soda fountain. He grabbed a city directory, flipped it to the "K" page.

There were several Kanes listed. But only two with the first name "Francis." He dialed the first number listed. An elderly man answered, and a few seconds were plenty to prove he wasn't the man Tolliver wanted.

He hung up, then put in another dime and dialed the second number. The phone rang three times. Tolliver started to hang up. It was a crazy idea, anyhow.

Then a voice came on the line,

asked briskly, "Yeah, what is it?"

Tolliver didn't speak, but carefully put the phone receiver on its hook and backed out of the booth.

Ten minutes later he stood in a dimly lighted corridor on the third floor of an apartment building that was located in the ragged fringe between the business district and the skid-row section. He rapped on a door marked: "324."

He waited, his hand going to his pants pocket where he had a toy pistol he'd bought at the drugstore near his home. The thing looked deadlier than a lot of real guns he'd seen. He took it from his pocket, used it to tap again on the door. He heard muffled footsteps. The door swung open.

The big, ugly Garro stood there, blinking at him. Garro opened his mouth to cry out.

Tolliver rammed the muzzle of his toy gun into the big man's mouth, at the same time saying softly, "You make a move and I'll blow your head through the far wall."

Garro breathed noisily. Then his eyes rolled up and he dropped to the floor, almost taking Tolliver down with him. He had fainted. Swiftly Tolliver patted the unconscious hulk's pockets—no gun, but a large switchblade knife.

Now a familiar voice called from inside the apartment, "That the

girls? Bring 'em on in now, Garro."

There was a short entrance hall leading into the apartment. Tolliver straightened to his feet at one end of it, just as Frank Kane appeared at the other end.

Kane gave a choked cry. He wheeled away, but Tolliver was upon him, clubbing him with the butt of the toy gun. Kane went sprawling face forward into the livingroom.

Tolliver frisked him. This time he found a gun. It was possibly the gun that had killed Arnold Banks. He put it into his hip pocket, and got to work.

A few minutes later, he sloshed a pitcher of cold water over Kane and Garro. The two came to, sputtering, and shaking their heads. They found themselves bound and gagged, and propped against the livingroom wall.

Tolliver sank down on his haunches between the two bandits. He said carefully, "I want to have a chat with you, Kane, before the cops get here. I called them on your phone."

Kane tried to talk around the rag

wadded inside his mouth. He couldn't, but his glaring eyes made conversation enough. They were murderous.

"I've a good mind to kill both of you," Tolliver said conversationally. "Save the state time and trouble."

He flicked open the long sharp blade of Garro's knife.

There was a pounding at the apartment door. It burst open, and the place was full of cops.

Lt. Hanson was unhappy, but when he saw the two bound and gagged hoods, he brightened. Tolliver explained, and the lieutenant brightened some more.

"Where's my wife?" Tolliver asked then.

"Downstairs, in my car. But listen—"

"Later, Lieutenant—later."

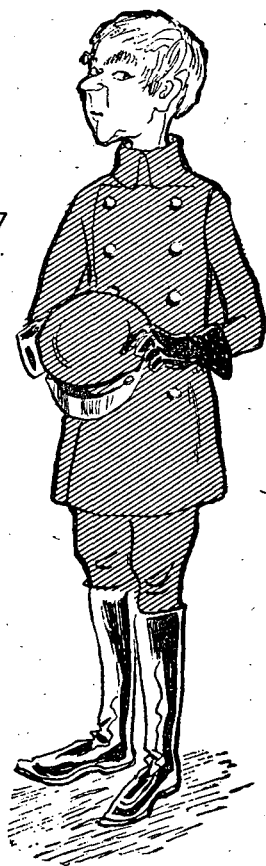
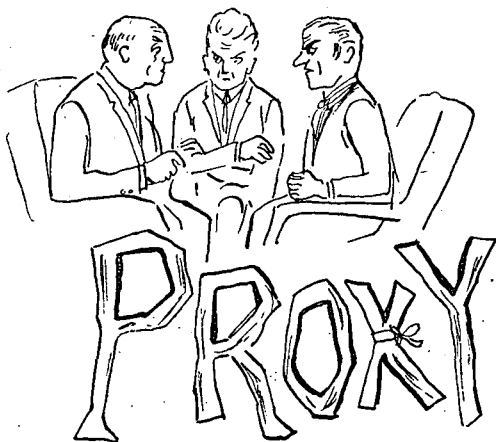
"You're not going to pull another run-out, are you?"

"Not me," Tolliver laughed. "Not when I've got this big chance to get my pictures in the papers, and everything. It gets awfully dull—being just a member of the crowd."

Then he was gone.



As an ardent exponent of sublety, I suggest the delicate shadings of "compromise" present interesting possibilities.



WHEN I left her apartment, I skedaddled straight to Mr. Friedland's estate. I left the car standing in the driveway and went in the big stone mansion like a coon with a pack on his trail.

I asked the butler where Mr. Friedland was, and the butler said our boss was in the study. So I busted in the study and closed the heavy walnut door behind me quick.

Mr. Friedland was at his desk. He looked up, bugged for a second by me coming in this way. But he didn't bless me out. He got up

quick and said, "What's the matter, William?"

I knuckled some sweat off my forehead, walked to the desk, and laid the envelope down. The envelope had a thousand smackers, cash, in it.

Mr. Friedland picked up the money. He looked a little adlepatated.

"You did go to Marla Scanlon's apartment, William?"

"Yes, sir."

"She was there?"

"Yes, sir."

By TALMAGE
POWELL

"But she didn't accept the money? William, I simply can't believe it."

I couldn't think of any easy way to explain it to him. "She's dead, Mr. Friedland."

He cut his keen eyes from the money to me. He was a lean, handsome man who looked about thirty-five years old in the face. It was just the pure white hair that hinted at his real age.

"Dead?" he said. "How, William?"

"Looked to me like somebody

strangled her to death. I didn't hang around to make sure. There's bruises on her neck, and her tongue is stuck out and all swelled up like a hunk of bleached liver. She was a mighty fêching hunk of female," I added with a sigh.

"Yes," Mr. Friedland said, "she was."

"But she don't look so good now."

"Was she alone in the apartment?"

"I reckon. I didn't feel the urge to poke around. Just had a look at her there on her livingroom floor and hightailed it here."

Mr. Friedland absently put the thousand bucks in his inside coat pocket. "She was alive three hours ago. She phoned me, just before I went out. I returned, gave you the envelope, and you went to her place and found her dead. Three hours. She was killed between two and five this afternoon."

"Could have been a lot of traffic in that much time, Mr. Friedland."

"I doubt it. Not today. Today she was expecting a caller with a white envelope. William, you didn't see anyone on your way out of the building?"

"No, sir."

"Phone anyone? Speak to anyone?"

"Not a soul, Mr. Friedland, until I got here and asked the butler where you was."

"Good. You're always a good man, William."

"Yes, sir," I said. "I try to be." Which was no lie. I'm a hillbilly from near Comfort, North Carolina, which is back up in the mountains. It's a mighty poorly place, believe me. Mr. Friedland came up there one summer for a week of fishing. I worked for him that week, and when the week was over he said as how would I like to keep working for him. He said I was intelligent and clean-cut and had respect for other people. He said he needed a chauffeur and a man to do errands and personal chores. He said I would have quarters on a nice estate and steady pay. So naturally I jumped at the chance. That was near five years ago, and I'm glad to say that Mr. Friedland has come to depend on me as few folks can depend on a personal worker. He trusts me and knows I can keep my mouth shut. And that means a lot to a bigshot newspaper publisher and television station owner like Mr. Friedland.

While I was simmering down and losing the shakes from my experience in Miss Marla Scanlon's apartment, Mr. Friedland was busy on the phone. He called Judge Harrison Corday and Mr. Robert Grenick, who is the prosecuting attorney. They were both close friends of Mr. Friedland. He told them to drop

everything, he had to see them right away. He said a thing of utmost importance had happened which couldn't be talked on the phone. He asked them to come to his study pronto, which they did.

Judge Corday got there first. He was one of the youngest superior court judges in the state. He liked parties and booze, and it was beginning to show around the softening edges of his face. He was a big, reddish man. He'd been a famous football star in college.

He said to Mr. Friedland, "What's up, Arch? I've got a dinner engagement and . . ."

"You may not want any dinner when you hear what I have to say," Mr. Friedland said. "To save a lot of repetitions, we'll wait until Bob Grenick arrives."

Judge Corday didn't press Mr. Friedland, knowing it would do no good. He sat down and lighted a dollar cigar and tried to read Mr. Friedland's lean, tight face.

Mr. Grenick showed up almost before Judge Corday got his cigar going good. Bald, chubby, and middle-age, Mr. Grenick had thick, heavy lips and thick, heavy eyes. Both his lips and eyes always looked slightly damp, like a lizard's back that lives in a spring branch.

As soon as Mr. Grenick was in the study and the door safely closed, Mr. Friedland said, "Tell them,

William, what you just told me."

"Miss Marla Scanlon is dead," I said.

The judge took it without blinking an eye. The state's attorney, Mr. Grenick, choked, put a hand to his neck, fumbled for a chair, and sat down.

"How?" Judge Corday said, cool.

"Murdered, I reckon," I said.

Mr. Grenick made noises like he was having a hard time getting air.

"By what means?" the judge asked.

"Choked to death, it looked like," I said.

"When?"

"Sometime between two and five," Mr. Friedland put in.

"What makes you think I have any interest until the murderer is caught and I act in official capacity?" Mr. Grenick said raggedly. "I hardly knew Marla Scanlon."

"Oh, come off it, Bob," Mr. Friedland said. "Marla Scanlon worked artfully and most skillfully. One by one she compromised the three of us. She didn't stretch her luck. We three were enough. She had her gold mine. She was content. She didn't intend to incur further risk by developing, in a manner of speaking, a source of silver."

Mr. Grenick got half out of his chair, gripping its arms. "I deny any . . ."

"Please shut up," Mr. Friedland

said quietly. "None of us is on trial, not yet. But we're the three who might have killed her. It's reasonably certain that one of us did. She's milked you the longest, Harrison. I was next. Bob, you're her third and final golden goose. Between us, we've contributed, over a period of time, something like a total of sixty thousand dollars."

"Too bad we never reported all that stashed cash to the income tax people," Judge Corday said. "They might have taken her off our backs."

"And the hides from our backs right along with her," Mr. Friedland said.

"How'd you find out all this?" Mr. Grenick asked. "About me, I mean?"

"That's a rather silly question, Bob," Mr. Friedland said. "I'm still a top reporter when it comes to digging out the facts. And I have the resources of a metropolitan newspaper at my disposal, don't forget."

"All right," Judge Corday said, like he was on the bench considering a motion by a lawyer. "It's laid out between us. We three were her patsys. Each had the same reason to dispose of her. We're cruising, in a word, in the same leaky boat. Now it remains to determine whether or not we have a paddle. Unfortunately, I have no alibi for

the three hours between two and five this afternoon. Have you, Bob?"

"What?" Mr. Grenick was looking sort of gray, like a prospect for a dose of calomel.

"Where were you between two and five this afternoon?"

"I was . . ."

"Yes, Bob?" Mr. Friedland prompted.

Mr. Grenick lifted his eyes and looked at his friends. "I didn't go in, understand. A block away, I turned the car. I didn't go all the way to her apartment."

"You were going to see Marla?" the judge asked.

"Yes. I was going to appeal to her, to prove to her that I couldn't afford the blackmail tariff any longer. I was going to convince her that she'd have to be satisfied with less—or nothing more, at all. I simply couldn't rake up the money, I tell you. I'm not as well heeled as you two."

"But you got cold feet," Mr. Friedland said. "You didn't actually see her?"

"That's right, Arch, and you've got to believe me."

"Whether or not we believe you," the judge said, "cuts little ice. The important thing is that you have no alibi. How about you, Arch?"

Mr. Friedland shook his head. "I got a call from her at two o'clock.

She reminded me that William was due at five with a thousand dollars. I drove out for a quiet, private look at some acreage I may purchase. I came back in time to send William on his errand."

"So any one of us might have killed her," the judge said.

"Listen," Mr. Grenick said in a tight voice, "I didn't do it. But if a scandal of this sort brushes off on me, I'm ruined. The three of us," his eyes looked wetter than usual, "are ruined. There are too many people in city hall and police headquarters who'd like to collect our scalps. We can't hush up a thing as big as murder, not even if Arch does control the press and TV."

"Precisely," Mr. Friedland said. "Sometimes, Bob, you almost convince me you have a mind, in addition to the cunning you've shown in the political jungles. We cannot cover this thing."

"So what do you propose?" Judge Corday asked.

"An unbreakable gentleman's agreement," Mr. Friedland said. "Whichever of the three of us is nailed, he must bear the entire thing alone. He must not turn to his friends for help or implicate them in the slightest. He must stand firm on the statement that he, and only he, was involved with Marla Scanlon. Whichever of us is doomed will at least have the satisfaction of

knowing that he shielded his friends."

"It might be rough," the judge said. "When a man's slapped in the face with murder, the natural reaction is to name others, to confuse the issue, to point suspicion elsewhere."

"I know," Mr. Friedland nodded, "and that's my reason for calling you here. We must decide in advance. We must agree that the two who escape will, throughout the future, stand by the loser's loved ones in any crisis, any trouble, as if the loser himself were still there."

"Mr. Friedland," I said.

He turned his head in my direction. "Yes, William?"

"All the time you been talking," I said, "I been thinking. I got a idear."

"William," Mr. Grenick said in a sore tone, "we've far more important things to consider than any ideas you . . ."

Mr. Friedland shut him up with a motion of his hand. "I don't think we have anything to lose by listening to you," Mr. Friedland said. "Go ahead, William."

"Thank you, sir. You see, Mr. Friedland, you've been real nice to me, giving me a chance to live like I never knowed people live, when I was a hillbilly back up beyond Comfort, North Carolina."

Mr. Grenick groaned. "This is

no time for asinine, emotional speeches."

"Yes, sir," I said. "Anyhow, I'm all through speechifying. I just wanted Mr. Friedland to know one of the reasons I'd be willing to do you-all the favor of standing trial for Miss Marla Scanlon's murder."

I had their attention now, believe me. Right then, you could have heard a mouse crossing the attic, only of course there wasn't none in Mr. Friedland's attic.

"William," Mr. Friedland said finally, "I'm touched. But I suspect that you haven't quite finished."

"No, sir, Mr. Friedland. Not quite. All three of you have society wives and fine kids and fancy homes and just everything to make life good. You stand to lose a real passel. But me, I got nobody but myself. And I never before had a chance to get me a stake together."

"How much?" Judge Corday asked.

"Well, you been paying Miss Marla Scanlon plenty. One final payment—to me—will finish it for good. Just chip in five thousand dollars apiece, and I'll protect you all from the aftermath of this terrible thing."

"I won't do it," Mr. Grenick said, "not five thou—"

"Yes, Bob, I think you will," Mr. Friedland said. He eased his backside to the edge of his desk and

brought his eyes back to me. "How do you propose to do it, William?"

"It ought to be simple as picking corn when the sun ain't hot," I said. "With your newspapers and TV on my side, and Judge Corday on the bench, and Mr. Grenick handling the case for the state, I ought to come off all right. I'll say that I had been hanky-pank with Marla Scanlon. I'll say she was giving me the boot. I'll say we got in a big fight and I lost my head and killed her without really meaning to. Nobody in this town really cares that she's gone, nobody to question or suspect what you do. I figure the judge should give me about three years for manslaughter. I'll behave good and be on parole inside of a year."

"And then?" Judge Corday said.

"I'll just take my fifteen thousand and go back to Comfort," I said. "None of us has got to worry about any of the others going back on the contract, account of we're all in this together and we sink or swim together."

"William," Mr. Friedland said, "I think you've got a deal. How about it, friends?"

Both the judge and Mr. Grenick were quick to nod.

"I suggest," the judge said, "that you and William contrive to rehearse a bit in private, Bob."

"A good idea," the prosecutor said.

"And you've fine material to work with here," Mr. Friedland said. "You won't have to worry about William botching his part."

"Well, gentlemen," I said, "let's get finished up here with the practice questions and all, soon's we can. I reckon I ought to get to police headquarters in a reasonable time. It'll look better if I surrender myself and show them how sorry I am for what I done to that girl."

"Excellent, William, excellent," Mr. Friedland said.

I got to admit it looked pretty excellent to me too. I'd go back to Comfort a little over a year from now with over fifty thousand dollars, counting the fifteen thousand these men would cough up.

Miss Marla Scanlon, in life, had had an eye on the future. When I'd made her open the wall safe in her apartment before I strangled her, I'd picked up a little over forty thousand.

Folks around Comfort, North Carolina are all eligible for this poverty program the government is running. It'll sure be nice, going back and being the richest man in the whole durn town. The air is clean, the scenery eye-popping, the likker mellow, and the girls all corn-fed beauties. I might even hire myself a chauffeur and personal errand boy—only I'll make sure his name ain't William.

An egghead who parades his capabilities also carefully sublimates his limitations, lest his sophistry be exposed.



By
*Frank
Sisk*

THE recipe was quite simple and the ingredients were readily available. This did not surprise Lily Quince, for it was what she had come to expect of her father—a display of magic with the things at hand.

"All you require, my child," he had said briskly over the phone, "are a few dozen leaves from that *Prunus virginiana* which is now flourishing to the rear of your

garage and in some abundance."

"*Prunus virginiana*? Oh yes, Dad. The chokecherry tree."

"Silly name. But as you wish, Lily. However, select only leaves that have begun to wilt."

"Why is that, Dad?"

"The juice concentrate is highest then."

"I see. A few dozen leaves, wilting. Will that be enough, Dad?"

"Quite enough. You aren't writing this down, I trust."

"Of course not. You don't think I'm that stupid, do you?"

"My faith in your native intelligence was slightly shaken when you married Joaquin Quince, my child. Now there's a silly name by anyone's standards."

"And he manages to live up to it."

"So you've led me to understand, Lily. Well, then, you'll need a small pressure cooker next."

"Is a two-quart one small enough?"

"It will do. But barely cover the bottom with water. A few ounces should be sufficient. Then toss in your leaves, seal the cooker and allow contents to stew for five minutes. Do you have a hypodermic syringe and needle?"

"Yes, you left one here, remember, when you were up a few months ago? The one you used for nutrient injections when Flummsy had the mange."

"Fortuitous, my dear. By the way, how is the dog doing?"

"She died a few days after you left, Dad."

"Trial and error, that's the heartbeat of science, Lily. Many trials and many errors precede ultimate

success, errors that tax patience."

"Oh, I understand that, Dad. I'm not blaming you. Besides, Flummsy was Joaquin's dog, not mine. And he made as great an ass of himself over her as he does over so-called literary bitches that seem to dote on his every poetic word and gesture. It's too bad he's not as talented as he thinks he is."

"I cannot abide a semi-egghead," said Lily's Dad sternly.

"Ditto, Dad. And speaking of eggs, what is the next step?"

"When the liquid residue in the pressure cooker has cooled to room temperature, simply draw up one cubic centimeter into the hypodermic syringe. Then take a fresh egg, also at room temperature, and gently insert the needle into the less rounded end. The trick is to penetrate the shell without noticeably rupturing the membrane. And slowly give the egg an injection. The larger the egg, the better."

"He insists on the jumbo size."

"Perfect, my dear."

"By the way, Dad, exactly what is this liquid? Technically, I mean."

"The pharmacopoeia would describe it as hydrocyanic acid."

"You're sure it will work?"

"My child," said Dad with a touch of asperity, "you may take my word for it."

Several hours later Lily had successfully prepared one of a dozen

jumbo-sized eggs. Opening the refrigerator door, she placed the treated egg in the front row of the porcelain tray.

Closing the door, she walked to the sink and continued to follow Dad's precise instructions. Earlier, she had removed the limp chokecherry leaves from the pressure cooker and set them to drain in the sink. Now she filled the pressure cooker with water and, without covering it, set it on the stove to boil.

Next, she wrapped the leaves in a paper towel and carried them to the backyard. The incinerator was already stoked with twigs and the rakings of dry grass. A single match was enough to set the fire.

Back in the kitchen, Lily dropped the separated hypodermic syringe and needle into the water that was beginning to simmer in the pressure cooker. Then she started to scour the sink with a sponge soaked in isopropyl alcohol. Later she would do her hands and arms.

Dad was meticulously thorough. Whenever she talked with him, she always learned something interesting. It had been that way as far back as she could remember.

Today, for instance, she had learned that it is the foliage, not the fruit, of the chokecherry bush which is poisonous. Moreover, she had learned that the purple berry is

known botanically as a pome. Dad had exercised his dry wit on that. "If there were truth in your misconception, Lily, we could invoke poetic justice and serve Quince a pome for breakfast instead of the prosaic egg."

Lily was laughing to herself when the phone rang. She glanced at the clock on the stove. One-thirty. This would be Joaquin late for lunch and with another implausible excuse.

She went to the hallway and picked up the receiver. "Yes?"

"How dulcet and divine," said Joaquin in his three-martini voice. A blur of voices and music composed the background. "I felt I must advise you to re-jug the caviar and re-cork the champagne."

"How sweet of you," said Lily blandly.

"The bard then is forgiven?" asked Joaquin.

"The bard sounds more like a bombed bird," said Lily. "Are you flying around the Green Mint Patio? Or is your location a secret?"

"Bull's-eye, sweet princess. Green Mint it is. Do I detect a critical note, a note accusatory?"

"Not at all. A note of relief, if anything. You'll be staying there for lunch, I hope."

"Already had it, my dear helpmeet."

"It seems to have quenched your

thirst, at least temporarily."

"Sarcasm, Lily, sarcasm. It hurts me in my ailment."

"What ailment is that?"

"My pump, my ticker, my hectic heart. You know I've been consulting a physician."

Lily laughed. "So you told me. And a female physician at that."

"You still don't believe me, Lily love?" His voice grew plaintively maudlin. "You doubt the bard's sworn word?"

"Of course not, Joaquin. After all, I saw you in consultation with my own eyes—over cocktails in the Embassy Lounge. But the tableau presented a point that has been troubling me ever since. Why were you, feeling the doctor's pulse instead of the other way round?"

"I'll explain it again, wife of my heart—when I come home to dinner. Until then, maintain a stoic facade."

"You may wish to assume a stoic facade yourself at the time, because I won't be here?"

"Alas! And why not, ma petite?"

"Dad phoned this morning. He's not feeling well. I'm going to fly down there."

"The ties of consanguinity are strong ties. What seems to be troubling the mad scientist? Some of his own potions perhaps?"

"You're truly amusing, Joaquin."

"So I am told. But not often by

you. How long will you be absent from our little nest?"

"A few days is all. You won't starve. There's food for at least three days in the refrigerator. Including a dozen jumbo eggs, fresh from the country."

"My salivary glands runneth over. One other thing, though, dear wife. Will you leave me a bit of green money? Certain little bills are coming due."

"Doctor's bills?"

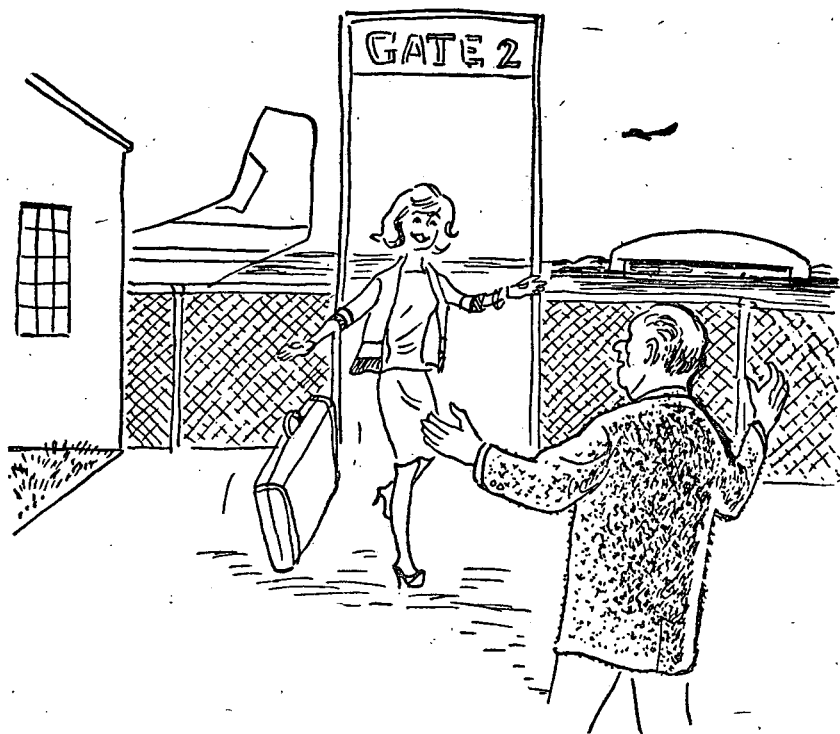
"Among others, yes. Fifty dollars should do nicely, lover. Hide it in the coffee pot. And bon voyage."

The plane arrived in Raleigh on the last slant of afternoon sunlight. Lily hurried through the terminal gate in a mood of quiet anticipation, which was as close as she had come to joy in many a month. A meeting with Dad always had this effect on her—and there he was, a neat grizzled man of medium build, trying to conceal his happiness behind a sardonic smile.

"Oh, Daddy," she cried, rushing toward him.

"Welcome home, my baby," said Dad, enfolding her in his arms. "Pardon the aroma of insecticide clinging to my coat. I was spraying the azaleas just before my departure from home."

"It smells so natural, Dad," said Lily.



Another thing that delighted her, a few minutes later, was the fact that Dad still owned the Italian sports car. Somehow the car fit him perfectly.

On the trip from Raleigh to Southern Pines they chatted about a dozen trivial things. The name of Joaquin Quince didn't arise until the last afterglow of sunset receded within the deep blues of the horizon, and that was just as they pulled into the driveway which ran beside Dad's pink stucco cottage.

As he turned the key in the ignition, he said crisply in the sudden silence, "Apropos your unfortunate marriage, Lily, did you ever consider the conventional alternative for bringing it to an end?"

"Divorce? I considered only for a moment, Dad, and then dismissed it for good."

"Tell me why, my child."

"Frankly I could not imagine myself admitting to the world that I had made a mistake."

Dad nodded appreciatively. "Ex-

actly. We have many traits in common, Lily."

"I know it," she said fondly.

"We're realists. When we make a mistake we recognize it, but we prefer to correct it privately."

"You do understand."

"The undeluded mind with undiluted pride; that's our mixture, my child."

Lily smiled. "I knew I could count on you, Dad."

"You've been counting on me for years, haven't you?" said Dad with that teasing wickedness in his voice.

That night in the drowsiness that beckons sleep, Lily felt like a child wrapped safely against the world's unpleasantness in her father's insulating wisdom. It was the recurrence of a familiar feeling that ran back to the mists of childhood. She could faintly hear herself calling from a crib across the years, and then she could see her father's silhouette in the doorway of the room. His voice was always soft with reassurances. He sometimes mentioned the nightingale outside the window as he tucked the blanket under her chin. And when he went finally from the room like a benign shadow, closing the door quietly, she felt safe enough to slip into sleep.

This night, just before sleep overtook her, the thought ran through her mind that Dad had been both a father and mother to her. She had

no other, no brother or sister. And no mother. Her mother, a picture of blonde beauty with a cigarette in an ebony holder, was framed in leather and folded away in a trunk these many years. She had died when Lily was four, leaving money but no memory to her daughter . . .

Over orange juice at breakfast, Dad went directly to the subject of Joaquin. "It's important, my dear, that you now realize exactly why you married Quince. Do you know why?"

"In general, yes. I thought he had the makings of a poet. At the time, I'd been reading biographies of Byron and Shelley. That was my mood, I guess."

Dad chuckled. "There's salvation in cool analysis. Do you know also what caused your disenchantment?"

"Many things, Dad. First, I gradually learned that he was a dilettante, more beat than beatific. Then I began to realize he was a compulsive philanderer, even in our own home. A woman simply had to purr a word of flattery at him and he was blind to all else but her—until the next flirtatious wench materialized."

"In short," said Dad, "you discovered, in this order of importance, that he didn't love you and that, incidentally, he was not much of a poet. Right?"

Lily chuckled now. "I'll accept

that, and about time, I'll admit."

"Good. Next, it is doubly important that you understand why Quince married you. Do you think you have that sifted out?"

"Completely."

"Let me hear you say it."

"Oh, there's not been any doubt in my mind for the past year, Dad, that he married me for money. He certainly didn't have any himself, and he never made any. As it was, he was rather disappointed upon learning I was not quite as rich an heiress as he was led to believe."

"Then you exaggerated the size of your income?"

"Not, specifically. By indirection probably." She shrugged her shoulders. "Any price for a poet."

Dad nodded sagely. "It's obvious, then, that you always understood the bait for Quince was partly money."

"Looking back in today's cold light, I must admit it. Yes, Dad."

"You're smarter than your mother ever was," said Dad as if to himself.

Lily raised an inquiring look over her coffee cup. "In just what way, Dad?"

"She never believed that I married her just for her money." He winked a wicked blue eye.

A week—and presumably seven jumbo-sized eggs—went into the maw of the past without a word

from or about Joaquin Quince. The strain of waiting began to tell on Lily.

Late one afternoon she put the question squarely to her father as he was coming from his little greenhouse. "What makes you so certain, Dad, that our special egg will work?"

"Take my word for it, child." He pulled off his work gloves. "If you followed my instructions, time will bear fruit. But just to put your mind at ease, let's review the salient steps." He counted off a finger on his left hand. "Point one: Quince is practically a fanatic on the subject of four-minute eggs. He must have one for breakfast every morning. Am I right?"

"Yes, that's so."

"Point two: he eats the egg with a spoon from an egg cup, less rounded side up?"

"Yes."

"When he removes a section of shell, he applies a liberal sprinkling of salt and pepper?"

"Yes, and Worcestershire sauce."

"Gad," said Dad, shaking his head disconsolately. "He deserves it. Point three: you have eleven untreated eggs and one treated egg in the refrigerator. No more or less."

Lily nodded, then said, "But what if he dropped one? Broke it?"

"It's a possibility, my dear, but the chances are eleven to one in

favor of his dropping an untreated egg."

"I suppose so. But seven days have gone by."

"You depend too much on the disposition of the eggs in the refrigerator. You expect Quince to consume them from front to back. His mind isn't of that order. Moreover, he may have had a breakfast or two away from home as the result of, shall we say, a night of poesy?"

Lily laughed in relief. "Yes, there's always that."

Dad smiled. "Let me assure you, my child, that when J. Q. consumes the egg in question, he will be only a few breaths away from death. He'll die right at the kitchen table. Point four: The milkman, nose by nature, will observe the defunct versifier when he delivers at noon."

"True. He always peers through the glass in the door to see if I'm there."

"Point five: when the police arrive, they will have no trouble getting in touch with you immediately because you have left a note to your husband, containing my phone number, conspicuously clipped to the directory."

"In case of emergency."

"The emergency will soon occur," said Dad.

Dad was right as usual. Four days later an official phone call terminated their lunch. A toneless voice,

self-identified as that of Captain Thomas McFate, tersely announced the facts: the body of Joaquin Quince had just been discovered in the kitchen of his home; cause of death as yet undetermined; no signs of violence; an immediate autopsy would be scheduled with or without consent of spouse; but said spouse should make plans to return home at once.

Within the hour Lily and Dad were en route to the Raleigh Airport. They exchanged little conversation. Intuitively, they used the silence to help each other over the abyss that somehow had opened beneath them, at least for Lily. They caught a 3:15 flight to New York.

As she unbuckled her seat belt and settled back with a sigh, Lily said, "I'm beginning to feel free as a bird."

Dad said, "I know."—He said it with conviction.

Lily turned to look at his fine old head. "I believe you really do, Dad."

"Never doubt it," he said with a strange softness.

"But I'm beginning to feel a bit afraid too. That police captain sounded so unsentimental."

Still speaking in a soft reminiscential way, Dad said, "You have nothing to fear, baby, nothing. Even if the medical examiner dis-

covers traces of hydrocyanic acid, the police will never learn how or by whom it was administered. The egg as a receptacle is never suspected because its shell guarantees the purity of the interior. And Quince has eaten the interior. Alibi? You haven't been within seven hundred miles of the place in the last eleven days. Motive? You have none. Quince had no money or insurance, and you never exhibited the slightest jealousy over his flings with other women." He moistened his lips and seemed to look far away. "Now in my case I had an excellent motive, several of them really. Still they weren't able to prove a thing because I was in Hot Springs, Arkansas, at the time, taking the series of baths with several other botanists, while Myra was basking in the adulation of her gigolos a thousand miles away."

Barely comprehending, Lily said, "Myra? You mean my mother, Dad?"

He kept looking out among the cottonballs of cloud. "Yes, my child. She had a few things in common with your recently departed husband. She was ungovernably promiscuous, and she believed firmly in the food value of softboiled eggs."

Despite the fact that her mother was not even a memory to her, Lily felt a sense of shock astir somewhere

within, then apparent in her face.

"Don't be shocked," said Dad as if reading her mind. "There wasn't a maternal bone in her body. If anything, she hated you for temporarily spoiling her figure."

"Why are you telling me this now, Dad?"

He turned and gazed at her affectionately. "I thought it might help you over this crisis to know how much we have to share with nobody else in the world."

She returned his gaze, suddenly knowing what he meant. "It helps," she said.

Lily opened the refrigerator door. "I'm famished."

"I'm rather hungry myself," said Dad. He looked at the gold wafer of a watch that was strung on a fine chain from lapel to coat pocket. "After all, my dear, it's eight hours since we had lunch in Southern Pines."

The police had finally left a half hour earlier.

Lily was examining the contents of the refrigerator. "I'm afraid there's not much here, Dad. Do you like Canadian bacon?"

"Love it."

"And some—" she could hardly say the word, "eggs."

"Yes, so long as they're not boiled. How many are left, Lily?"

"Two."

"Number Ten did the trick," said Dad with satisfaction. "Interesting."

"I'll scramble them," said Lily quickly. "Is that all right?"

"Fine, baby."

"Tea or coffee?"

"Tea would suit me."

Within a few minutes of wordless work, Lily had the small supper prepared and served. Just as she was spreading a napkin on her lap, the phone rang. "Go ahead without me, Dad," she said, rising. "And help yourself to these muffins while they're hot."

"Don't worry," said Dad.

A switchboard operator was on the line saying that Captain McFate wished to speak with Mrs. Quince. Just a minute, please. And the minute ran on interminably, it seemed, before that unsentimental voice came across to her.

"Mrs. Joaquin Quince?"

"Yes, Captain. What is it?"

"I thought you would like to know the results of the autopsy."

"Are they ready so soon?"

"Yes. The medical examiner finds that your husband died of a heart attack."

"A heart attack?"

"Something about a ruptured mitral valve in the left atrium. You sound surprised, ma'am."

"Well, I am."

"The medical examiner's finding agrees with a report just filed by your husband's physician. You knew he was under treatment, didn't you?"

"Not really."

"Well, Doctor L. G. Smith read about your husband's death in the afternoon paper and presented herself at headquarters. Yes, Doctor Smith is a woman, the L standing for Lorna. Says she's been treating Mr. Quince for the past three months for heart leakage."

There was one more question Lily had to ask. "Does the autopsy indicate the time of my husband's death?"

"Yes, ma'am. The M. E. places it between nine and twelve last night."

"Then he didn't—"

Lily dropped the receiver on the cradle and walked in wonder to the kitchen. Dad's fine old head lay on the table.

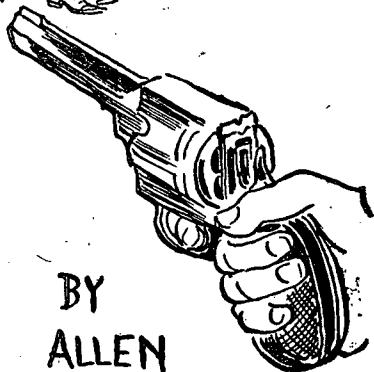


As it is for those of frighteningly doubtful integrity, the naked truth is oftentimes fraught with hazards for the participants in the game of romance.



SNAKE and Joe Dee were stalking the household appliances counter of the Erie Department Store with their shoplifter's booster box when Snake looked over his head and discovered a goldmine.

"We're folding up this penny ante game, Junior," Snake told his partner. He stared at the exhaust fan that buzzed stale air out over a hosiery department display of plastic gams.



BY
ALLEN
KIM
LANG

CANDY FROM A BABE

87

"So how are we gonna ease outta this creep town without we steal ourselves a stake?" Joe Dee asked.

"With brains," Snake said. "Who sneak-footed us out of that cage up north, ex-celly?"

"You did," Joe Dee admitted. "And that was pretty smart, too; the way we hid in those Red Cross blood boxes while they rode us out the main gate."

"Who was a thief for twenty years, and made by the Man only once?"

"You were, Snake; and like you always say, that was a accident."

"So trust my old gray head, Junior," Snake said. "Now here's what I'm gonna do. First off, I forge you some recommendations and get you into this emporium as the night watchman."

"Could you maybe tell your partner why?"

"Unless my sixth sense is on the fritz, Junior, right behind that fan up there is the State Bank. It uses the same air-conditioning pipe as this stupid store. We're gonna grab that bank by its windpipe, see?" Snake asked.

"Like you said, I trust your head, Snake," Joe Dee testified.

"Good." Snake tucked the booster box, with a stolen toaster resting inside its pickup trap, under his arm. "I'll make sure the regular night watchman takes a week off sick. You case the yokel Fire De-

partment and swipe us a bolt cutter, Junior. We're about to get into the Money Business. Wholesale."

Art Case whistled as he unlocked the main door of the State Bank the next morning, unaware that he was steaming into his personal Pearl Harbor. Red-haired Millie Norton backed against the door to hold it open for him with a soft and lovely prop. Two policemen watched from their car across the street, their eyes intent on Miss Norton's stretch-and-flex.

Inside, Art Case locked the door, lifted the blind, and saluted the guardian policemen. They waved back and drove off, exchanging raw thoughts about red-haired Millie. Then Art and the girl set to work on their morning routine, counting and verifying the night depository receipts.

Joe Dee, thanks to the unexpected illness of the Erie Department Store's regular night watchman, had let Snake into the store three hours before the young tellers came to work at the bank next door. "You said some real nice things about me in them recommendations you made up, Snake," he said.

"Least I can do is help an ex-con get a honest job," Snake said. "Come on, Junior. We got lots of work to do."

Snake went directly to the hosiery department and stacked cartons up to the exhaust fan. Joe Dee climbed up. Squeezing his bolt cutter, he chipped away at the blades and grill. A dark steel gut stretched beyond, leading under a chimney to the bank's exhaust fan. Joe Dee wriggled his two hundred pounds into the cave and clipped out the second fan like a dentist chiseling out a stubborn molar. He eased the scrap of the two fans down to the floor of the store. "By the time the store detective stumbles his flat feet over this junk," Snake told him, "we'll be heading east with the loot."

Joe Dee's skin looked like the inner lining of a vacuum cleaner bag. He grunted back into the steel tube and wormed along the bank's exhaust pipe till he was above the teller's cages. Sweating black drops, working in darkness, he bored a hole in the floor of the steel barrel in which he was cased. When the hole was big enough, he worked a hacksaw blade from the pocket of his overalls and began to slice out his exit. "No thief should work so hard," he mumbled. Finally he was able to lower the section of tubing down to the false ceiling of the bank. Easing down, he screw-driven a peephole through the wallboard, trying not to scatter dust through it that might cause the bankers to look up.

Snake slithered through the tube, lean as a tapeworm, behind Joe Dee. "Good work, Junior," he said. His voice boomed in the darkness.

"Thanks," Joe Dee said. He lay half out of the conduit like a crab housed in a limpet shell, his arms splayed out on the thin ceiling. Through the peephole he could see the cages they'd crash into soon, to play trick-or-treat with the tellers.

Snake could hear the tapping of Miss Norton's heels across the tile floor. He glanced at the pale face of his wristwatch, then eased back to the store end of the chimney to light a cigarette and review his plan of attack.

Unaware that their bank had rats in its joists, Art Case scrunched at his adding machine and Millie Norton tap-bump-tapped her tabulator, talking about last night's movie and next fall's wedding. Art got out his pipe. A curl of smoke screwed up through Joe Dee's peephole. Joe Dee eased a cigarette out of an inside pocket and slithered a little farther out of his shell to enjoy it in clean air.

Finished with it, Joe Dee leaned forward to crush the butt against the ceiling below him. His knees felt the steel buckle, and an instant later he was through a shower of plaster, floundering like an octopus shaken from a net.

Blinded by dust, Joe Dee was

still able to twist aside from the front of the cage that could have sliced him in two. He landed on his knees on the marble counter in front of Millie Norton, and said a word that jolted the girl three feet further back. Deposit slips, checks, ten-dollar bills and an exploding orange roll of quarters scattered around like confetti at a hero's homecoming.

Joe Dee scuttled off the counter like a cockroach. He grabbed Millie and slapped a soot-fuzzed hand over her open mouth. He reached the other hand back to his rear pocket to get his gun. "No yelling," he gasped. He uncovered the girl's mouth.

"No yelling," Art Case promised. "What do you want?"

"Same as everybody," Joe Dee said. "Money." He turned to the hole he'd blasted through the ceiling and yelled. "Coast is clear, Snake!"

Millie Norton screamed as Snake's arm appeared, holding bolt cutters, followed by Snake's head. "I told you, Beautiful," Joe Dee said, slapping his hand back over her mouth. "No noise."

Snake slithered himself down to the marble countertop, then to the floor beside his young partner. "Joe Dee," he said sadly, "you're an idiot."

"If you're so smart, why didn't you put on your face-mask before you came out?" Joe Dee demanded.



Snake dropped the bolt cutters next to Joe Dee's foot and took out his own .38. "With you jumping through the ceiling hard enough to jar the phones off the hook at the police station, I just didn't think of it," he said.

"Mr. Lamboley always told us

that we were to hand over the money, in case of a holdup, without making any fuss," Art Case said. He released his grip on Millie Norton's arm to stoop and scoop up the bills that Joe Dee had scattered across the floor. Patting them into a neat deck, Art held the money out to Snake. "Here."

Snake tucked the bills inside his overalls, into a pocket of the suit he wore beneath. "Thanks loads," he said; "but we didn't come through your roof to get change for the cigarette machine. We'll wait till this boss of yours, this Lamboley, comes in and opens young Fort Knox." Snake shook a thumb over his shoulder, in the direction of the vault.

Joe Dee worked out of his overalls and dropped them in a grimy heap. "I'm sweatin' like a fish," he confessed. "Did you ever lay around a air-conditioning pipe?"

"Never," Millie Norton said.

Her fellow teller glanced at the clock. "I'll have to let Mr. Lamboley in when he knocks," Case said.

"You'll let him in. We'll tell him the score," Snake said. He shucked his overalls.

"Snake," Joe Dee said, "your face is dirty."

"You ain't no lily yourself, either." Snake dampened his handkerchief on his tongue and catstroked his face into a pattern of ver-

tical gray stripes. "Better?" he asked.

"Dandy," Millie said. "All you need now is a suit to match."

"How we gonna kill time till the man gets here with the safe combination, Snake?" Joe Dee asked his partner.

"Get four chairs, Junior," Snake said. "We'll all sit down and wait, back from the telephone and the alarm pedals, till boss Lamboley knocks at the front door."

"I don't suppose you gentlemen play bridge," Millie Norton remarked.

"Don't infuriate them," Art cautioned the redhead.

"We don't infuriate that easy," Snake said. "Have a seat." Millie, smoothing her skirt beneath her, scooted her chair an inch further back from the two thieves.

Snake crossed his legs and rested his pistol hand on one knee. "You kids look smart enough to play by the rules," he observed.

"Whatever you say, Mister Snake," Art Case testified.

"Rule One is no surprises," Snake explained. "No fast moves. No loud talk. Don't get up from your chair unless I say to."

"We understand, don't we, Millie?" Case asked. He rubbed a hand across his sweat-wet crewcut.

"Don't try to get us rattled," Snake said. "We're pro thieves, me and Junior. We don't shake easy."

"We already seen everything there is to see," Joe Dee volunteered. "A guy can get a college education in a prison yard, he keeps his eyes open."

"Unless you're hankering to go back to school, Joe Dee," Snake suggested, "let me do the talking."

Joe Dee shrugged. He leaned down to fish in a pocket of his discarded overalls for a pack of cigarettes, which he held out to Millie. "Have a smoke, Beautiful?" he asked.

"No, thank you," she said. "They're probably stolen goods."

"Millie, for goodness sake, be polite to them," Case said.

"This is not," Millie observed, "a social occasion."

Snake stood and worked off the jacket of his suit, slapping his revolver from one hand to the other as he pulled his hands through the sleeves. "Red, brush off the dust," he ordered. "I don't want to look conspicuous when I walk out of here."

"With bullet holes in the coat, you'll look conspicuous anyway," Millie said.

"Millie! Keep a civil tongue," Case exclaimed.

"Do that," Joe Dee said. "You two got your job, countin' money, and we got ours, takin' it. To each his own."

Millie took Snake's jacket over

to her cage and got out a clothes-brush. "Don't try to mash your pretty foot on that buzzer pedal, Red," Joe Dee said. "We got six eyes on you, and two of 'em's guns."

"Mr. Dee, I didn't hire here to be a heroine," Millie said. She whisked Snake's jacket clean. "Some of these wrinkles might shake out if we hung it up for a while," she suggested.

"Give it here." Snake put the coat back on. "When we cut out of here, we'll be walkin' pretty brisk. No time to snatch up clothes right and left, kiss goodbye, linger in the doorway to shake hands. Joe Dee, let Red brush your coat."

"Purely a pleasure." Joe Dee watched the girl brush away the dust kittens that had crept in through his overalls.

She handed him back the jacket. "You fellows lead a lively life," she remarked.

"We been most everywhere," Joe Dee bragged, shrugging his coat on over his gun. "We been in and out of some of the toughest cans in the country."

"Perhaps I could sponsor you at our local bastille," Millie said.

"Careful, Millie," Art Case cautioned his girlfriend.

"I had the con bit up to here," Joe Dee said, placing his hand at his Adam's apple. "We're headin' for Havana when you hand over all

that money. The cops here don't have any pull in Cuba. They can't exter-dite us. The beauty part is, I had a Mex celly at Mich City. I speak the language real good."

"As good as you speak English, which ain't sayin' a whole lot," Snake said.

"Don't ask any more questions, Millie," Art Case cautioned her. "We can't afford to know too much about these men."

"Dumb won't do you much good, now," Snake said. "You kids already know more than's healthy."

"What do you mean?" Case demanded, his hands fisted.

"He means, Art, that they're going to shoot us," Millie explained.

"Snake!" Joe Dee wailed. "Do we gotta?"

"You like the smell of cyanide gas, Junior?" Snake asked. "Your neck itch to be scratched on a loop of rope? Get your kicks from AC current? Junior, that guard we left back at the pen is underground by now, with his hands folded and undertaker's juice in his veins to keep him from spoilin'. If we left with these pigeons set to sing along behind us, we'd be picked up before we reached the Mississippi River, let alone Miami."

"I don't hold with killin' people," Joe Dee muttered.

"So who plugged that Tulsa gas-pump jockey, Mahanda Gandhi?"

Snake demanded. "Tell me that."

"My gun just went off," Joe Dee explained. "Accidental."

"Accidents buzz around you like gulls over a garbage scow," Snake snorted. "Forty bucks and a tank of gas; for that you had to shoot the man. Then you come here and fall out of the sky ahead of schedule, and we gotta shoot two more folks."

"No!" Art Case said, holding up both hands. "You don't have to shoot us. We'll keep quiet, won't we, Millie? We'll give misleading descriptions; we'll say we didn't see you plain. . ."

"Don't try to bargain with these animals, Art," Millie said.

"Aw, Beautiful!" Joe Dee protested.

"Look at it this way, Arthur; it's the breaks," Snake said. "You and the girlfriend could of been walking across the street for lunch and get hit by some drag-racin', dirty-faced punk. You could lay in the hospital for months with a plastic tube up your nose. This way, it'll be nice and clean."

"Thanks," Millie said.

"I'd like a glass of water," Art Case croaked.

"Go get it, but go slow," Snake said.

As the two gunmen followed Case with their weapons, Millie Norton stood and raised her chair from the floor. Joe Dee's eyes flashed back to

her, and he grabbed the chair. Snake grabbed Case by the shoulder, turned him around, and hammered his pistol into the crewcut. Art Case slumped to his knees, groaning. He touched his bleeding head to the tile floor.

Snake turned to Millie. "Try any more wise tricks, Red, and I'll hit your boyfriend hard." Art crawled to his chair. He looked up at Millie with wounded eyes.

"Beautiful, you got class," Joe Dee said. "Ever been to Cuba?"

"I'm not with the C.I.A.," she said. She reached for her purse. Snake snatched it away, and ransacked it. After he'd transferred the girl's billfold to his own pocket, he allowed her to dig out a handkerchief and blot at the cut in Case's scalp.

"We were going to be married," Art moaned. He rested his head in Millie's lap as she daubed the cut.

"Tough," Snake admitted. "But look at the expense you'll save." He glanced up at the clock. "The boss is due."

"A policeman checks Mr. Lamboley in through the door," Millie said.

"We know that," Joe Dee said. "You think we're new at this game, Beautiful?"

"Mr. Lamboley may bring an early customer in with him," she said. "Perhaps one of the police-

men will come in to open a Vacation Club account."

"Maybe you better shut up, Red," Snake said. "I hate to mash a woman in the mouth."

But Millie persisted. "You'll have to kill me and Art. You may have to shoot Mr. Lamboley and two policemen. You might have to murder witnesses when you run out of here with the money. Is thirty thousand dollars, more or less, worth so much killing?"

"We already got a murder rap, Beautiful," Joe Dee said. Once you get that far, what the hell matters what you do?"

"There's three thousand dollars in your pocket right now," the girl said. "Won't that be enough to get you out of the country?"

"Red, when guys are hot as we are," Snake said, "they gotta travel underground. That takes lots of grease."

"You ever watch the mokes visitin' the Post Office on their lunch hour, Beautiful?" Joe Dee asked her. "Standin' there, lookin' over the WANTED posters? Snake's face is there. So's mine. Between us, we got more pictures in Post Offices than George Washington has, and he's on the five-cent stamp."

"You won't get anywhere arguing, Millie," Case said. He stood carefully and returned to his chair.

"Don't get uppity, Arthur, or

I'll lay open the other side of your head," Joe Dee said. "Who says Beautiful can't get anywheres with us? She could get to Havana, which is more'n most folks could."

"I said no," Millie said. "My place is beside Art. Dead or alive."

"My regrets, Beautiful," Joe Dee sighed. "It ain't gonna be alive." He tapped the muzzle of his revolver on his left knee and hummed. "You like to rhumba, Beautiful?" he asked suddenly.

"Good grief," Art Case said.

Millie shook her head. She sat with her hands crossed on her lap. "It looks pretty hopeless, Art," she said. "I guess all I can say is that I love you. Too bad that we won't find out whether twins actually run in my family."

"Can it, Beautiful," Joe Dee pleaded. "I ain't a monster. Don't make it worse for me than it already is."

"By all means, let's keep this a civil double murder," she said.

"Joe Dee is tender-hearted," Snake apologized. "Junior is specially sentimental about babies and birds and beautiful broads."

"Snake, couldn't she ride along as far as Florida?" Joe Dee asked.

"It's dangerous to pick up hitchhikers, Junior," Snake answered. "I read where J. Edgar Hoover says so."

"It don't seem right to smash

that pretty red head with a bullet," Joe Dee said. "How about it, Beautiful? We can afford another plane ticket, once that safe door is open."

"If I were to leave with you," Millie Norton asked, "would you two let Art stay here? Alive?"

"Hell, no!" Joe Dee said. "This rat-fink would sick a herd of bloodhounds onto our footsteps before we got east of the city limits."

"Then I'll stay here, too," she said.

Joe Dee stared down at his dirty knuckles, the black under his nails. "I know what you're thinkin', Beautiful," he said. "I come from the cabbage-cookin' side of the tracks. I'm an ex-con. You're a college girl, smellin' of bath salts and toothpaste."

Art Case interrupted. "Mr. Lamboley will be here in minutes," he announced.

"Attaboy, Arthur!" Snake said. "Keep the show on schedule."

Millie clutched her purse and stood. "If I may," she said, "I'd like to visit the restroom."

"Check it out, Junior," Snake ordered his partner. "See that there ain't no phones inside, or any windows she could yell out of."

"Gee, Snake . . . Do I gotta go in there?" Joe Dee asked.

"Yes, you gotta," Snake said. "And while you're checking, wash your face. And bring out a wet

towel for me. Hurry it up, now."

"If you say so." Joe Dee went to the door marked LADIES and tapped timidly with the butt of his revolver. "Coming in!" he said at the crack of the door.

"Get IN there, Junior!" Snake shouted.

"Oh, well." Joe Dee shrugged and pushed through the door. A moment later, clean-faced and blushing, he returned. "No phone," he reported. He handed Snake a damp paper towel. "No windows, either."

SNAKE scrubbed the soot streaks from his face. "Go on in, Red," he said.

"Thank you so much." Millie picked up her purse. She turned away from the two thieves to face Case. "I'm sorry it's over, Art," she said. She winked.

Case nodded. "Yeah," he said, a little hope showing in his eyes.

Millie left them. "That doll is wasted on a ribbon-clerk type like you, Arthur," Snake observed. "Brains, she's got. Class. Natural redhead, too; not out of some bottle. That right, Arthur?"

"I wisht she was goin' to the islands with us," Joe Dee persisted. "Dancin' the limbo, rum and cola, cheek-to-cheek, sleepin' late . . ."

"Nope," Snake said. "Red stays here."

"OK." Joe Dee looked at his hands again. "Will you do me a

favor, Snake?" he asked sadly.

"I can guess what it is, Junior," Snake said. "All right. You turn off anxious Arthur. I'll take care of the chick." He glanced again at the clock over the vault. "She better not hole up in there," he said. "Boss Lamboley will be banging our front door any minute. Better go roust out your lady friend, Junior."

"For pete's sake . . ." Joe Dee began.

Millie opened the door of the ladies' room and stepped out. She was as naked as the day her mother made her.

SNAKE stood slowly, his eyes fixed. Art Case was up and swinging his chair at the base of Snake's skull before the door behind Millie had shut. Snake caught a chair-leg on his right earlobe, another at the back of his head. He fell, his mouth hanging open. Case stomped the revolver from his hand.

Joe Dee was taking off his jacket. "Here, Beautiful, put this on," he said. "Gee whiz!"

Art Case fired Snake's gun once. Joe Dee toppled toward Millie, as though hastening to cover her with his jacket. Case fired twice more, and hit Joe Dee both times before his body fell across Snake's.

"Art!" Millie jumped across the corpse and threw her arms around her boyfriend's neck. "You did it!"

There was pounding at the front door of the bank. After a moment it was reenforced by the rapping of a police nightstick. Case shoved the girl away from him. "You tramp!" he hissed. "Get dressed!"

"Let in Mr. Lamboley and the policemen," Millie said. "Give me that gun. I'll cover Snake."

"Cover yourself," Case said.

Millie ran back into the restroom. A moment later, clothed haphazardly, she returned. "I'm sorry I had to strip, darling," she said, breathless. "Those men said nothing could surprise them. They said they'd seen everything in prison. That's what gave me the notion to do it. I surprised them, didn't I?"

"Here." Case handed her Snake's pistol. "If either body moves, shoot it in the head," he said. "If you have the heart to kill an admirer." He trotted to the door and twisted the latch. Puffing with apprehension, Mr. Lamboley pushed in ahead of the drawn police guns.

Case pointed. "I got one with the chair; the other with the first one's gun," he said.

"You might have been killed." Lamboley bumbled over to the girl. "Millie, you look ruffled. Are you all right? Where in the world are your shoes?"

Barefoot, Millie Norton walked closer to Art Case. He stepped aside.

One cop flashlighted the hole in

the ceiling. "They got in here," he suggested.

"The devils!" Lamboley exclaimed.

Art Case wasn't listening to any of them. He was backing Millie into her teller's cage, whispering fiercely, his face an inch from hers. "How could you have done such a shameful thing to me?" he demanded. "Disgusting! Displaying your hussy body to those two jailbirds."

"Art, we had to get them off balance," the girl explained, dabbing one finger into the tear on her cheek. "It was the only way I could think to surprise them."

"I'd sooner be shot through the head than see you make a public spectacle of yourself like you did," he said.

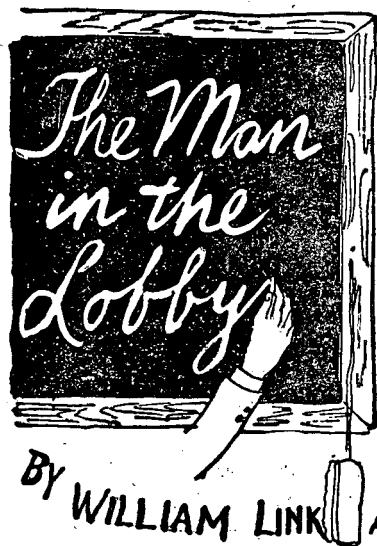
Mr. Lamboley padded into the cage as Case stalked out. He put a heavy arm across Millie's shoulders. "Cry it out, my dear," he ordered. He smiled through the grillwork at Case. "Women aren't up to this sort of excitement, are they, Art?" Mr. Lamboley returned his attention to the girl. "Millie, you can be proud of that young man of yours," he said. "Art Case's courage has just saved your life."

"I know," Millie Norton sobbed, pulling free from the fat man's comforting pats. "And I wish I were dead!"

Under certain circumstances, the burden of dispelling a false impression might be, perhaps, more onerous than bearing the misrepresentation.

It had been a wasted morning for Wolfson. The captain had sent him over to the Golden Gate Hotel to check out a public nuisance complaint, but after a brief investigation he found that it was groundless—a few conventioners had blundered into the wrong room after a night of carousing.

He left the elevator and glanced at the people coming in from Powell



Street. It was not quite noon, but the hotel bar was already crowded with advertising men from the cluster of office buildings a few blocks away. All riding the expense account, he imagined. What would it take to pull them away from their martinis and black Russians? A stock market crash, probably. Either that or another earthquake.

Well, it was time to report back. As he started across the busy lobby he brushed by a man at the check-in desk. The face hung for an instant in his mind, then he dismissed it. At the street door he hesitated and turned back. The man at the desk was in his early fifties, meek and rumpled, with the slightly dazed expression of someone who had spent his life in front of a blackboard or an adding machine. He wore a cheap summer suit and a frayed blue shirt.

Wolfson strolled back to the counter and tried to get a better look.

"Anything on the twelfth floor?" the man was saying.

"1205 is available," said the desk clerk. "Nice and spacious." He slipped a registration card into a leather holder and pushed it across the counter. "There's a lovely view of the pagodas on Grant Street."

The man mumbled something, then signed the card and started for the elevators. Wolfson, no more

than a casual foot away, instantly made the connection. He took his wallet from his back pocket and crossed to the man, tapping him on the shoulder. "San Francisco police," he said, showing his badge. "Sorry to bother you, sir, but would you mind telling me your name?"

The little man blinked at him from watery eyes. "Miller," he said in a fuzzy, classroom voice. "Charles Miller."

"Mind waiting here just a minute, Mr. Miller?"

Wolfson went to the desk and opened his wallet again. "I'd like to see this gentleman's registration card, please."

The clerk produced the information. "Charles Miller, 10337 Lombard Street, San Francisco."

Wolfson copied down the address and returned the card. When he swung back to Miller, the little man was staring vaguely up at the hotel clock, idly juggling the room key.

"You live here in San Francisco, don't you, Mr. Miller?"

"Yes." The voice seemed on the verge of disappearing.

"Then why are you checking into a hotel?"

Miller shrugged. "Business."

"What kind of business?"

Miller looked up again at the clock, as if he were a small boy

waiting impatiently for a recess.

"What kind of business, Mr. Miller?"

"I have to meet a few people. Salesmen, mostly."

Wolfson glanced at the carpet.

"And no luggage?"

"Just overnight."

Wolfson studied his face closely.

Could he be mistaken? Was there a chance that this was a look-alike, a near-perfect double? There was a tiny white scar just below Miller's left eye that seemed to underscore the man's essential blankness. That scar and the rest of the description could be checked by teletype this afternoon.

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you for some identification."

After a slight pause the man patted most of his pockets and finally fished an old wallet from somewhere inside his jacket. He held it out.

"No, you go through it. Social security card, driver's license. Anything."

The man thumbed through a small packet of cards and handed him a license. It was State of California issue and the name was Charles Miller.

As Wolfson studied it a group of bystanders had begun to gather, trying to edge closer.

"Sorry to trouble you like this, Mr. Miller, but I'd like you to come

with me. It shouldn't take more than a half-hour or so."

The little man looked wistfully at the elevators. "But I thought I could . . ." His voice threatened to disappear again. "Is it important?" he asked.

"I've got a car outside. It'll be as quick as I can make it."

"Well . . . I suppose so." He looked down at the key in his white, plump hand. "What should I do?"

Wolfson began to feel a little sorry—for him. "You've already registered. They'll hold the room for you." He guided the man toward the door. "You'll be back in plenty of time to keep your appointments."

Outside in the bright, almost holiday air, Miller seemed dazed and lost. A cable car jangled, and he stiffened upright with the sound. Wolfson took his arm and led him up the hill, watching him carefully. The man was blinking hard in the glittering sunlight, but he looked more bewildered than trapped.

When they reached the automobile Wolfson held open the door, then got in and started the engine, throwing his companion a quick, assessing glance. The man was staring down at his hands, still toying with the key.

"Mr. Miller," Wolfson said, driving toward Market, "there's something that bothers me. You haven't

once asked why I'm taking you in."

Miller shrugged listlessly. They were passing Union Square and a pigeon sprang gray and frightened across the windshield.

"Why aren't you interested?"

"I imagine I'll find out."

"I imagine you will." It would take only a short time to verify. And he was pretty sure that Miller wouldn't be returning to his hotel.

He parked the car a block off Market and walked the little man up the steps of the station house. There was no one in the squad room, just a few stale newspapers and the smell of new paint. He left Miller alone in the interrogation room and went down the corridor to Sy Pagano's office.

Pagano was leaning on the windowsill, looking up at the sky. "I haven't seen a gull in weeks," he said. "You think it's the fallout or something?"

Wolfson didn't bother closing the door. "Got something, Sy."

"Yeah?"

"Brought in a man by the name of Charles Miller. I think it's an alias."

Pagano was looking up at the sky again. "Who do you think he is?"

"Frederick Lerner. The school teacher from Santa Barbara who killed those two women last week."

Pagano turned abruptly from the window. "Are you sure it's him?"

"The description fits. L.A. sent a wire-photo up yesterday. They mentioned he might have headed for San Francisco."

"Where'd you spot him?"

"The Golden Gate Hotel. He was checking in without luggage."

Pagano picked up the phone and punched a button. "I'll call L.A., get more information. Where've you got him?"

"Interrogation." Wolfson went out and walked back to the other office. Miller was sitting in a chair, looking at the wall. His eyes squinted slightly in the bright rush of light from the window. Wolfson drew the shade and sat down with him. He took his time lighting a cigarette. "Sorry. You want one?"

"I don't smoke."

"How long have you lived in San Francisco, Mr. Miller?"

The little man rubbed his eyes. "Only a few weeks."

"Where did you live before that?"

"New York. My company sent me out here."

Wolfson got up, went back to the window. There was no one in the street beneath the half-lowered shade. A church clock chimed the hour and he checked it with his watch. "What line of work are you in, Mr. Miller?"

"Heavy goods jobbing."

"Married?"

There was a pause while the chimes succeeded each other like ripples in water. "Yes, I'm married."

"Happen to have a picture of your wife?"

"Is it important?"

Wolfson came back to him. The man's face was in half-shadow, but blinked up at the detective.

"It's important, Mr. Miller. Do you have one?"

The old wallet came out again. The man fumbled through the celluloid card folder, then held up a photograph. Wolfson took it over to the light. It was a crisp new picture of an attractive blonde, considerably younger than her husband. There was an interesting pout to the mouth. "Married long?" he asked.

"Few weeks."

The door opened and Pagano came in, carrying a file folder. "This is my partner, Mr. Miller, Lieutenant Pagano. You make that call, Sy?"

"Tried. The lines are tied up."

Wolfson took the photograph over to him. "This is Mr. Miller's wife."

Pagano studied it expressionlessly. He opened the file folder and removed two photos, tilting them so that only his partner could see. "The victims," he said.

Wolfson touched the photos, moving them to catch the light.

They both showed middle-aged women with vacant, trusting faces. Neither resembled the blonde.

"Your wife at home, Mr. Miller?" Pagano asked suddenly. It was his first acknowledgement of the man's presence.

"Yes."

Wolfson picked up the phone. "What's the number?"

Miller swung around quickly in the chair. "No—she's not at home. I made a mistake."

Wolfson met Pagano's eyes. "Oh? Where is she then?"

"She—left for Nevada this morning. Visiting some friends."

"I see. Has she got a phone number there?"

"No."

Pagano came around the side of the desk. "Stand up, Miller."

Miller got awkwardly to his feet.

"See that blackboard on the far wall? Why don't you go over there and pick up that piece of chalk."

Miller did as he was told.

"Fine," said Pagano, glancing at Wolfson again. "Now write something on the blackboard."

The little man seemed ready to cry. "What should I write?"

"Anything. I don't care."

Miller was motionless for a moment, then his hand glided up and he wrote "Charles Miller" in a graceful, sweeping line. He started to turn around but Pagano called,

"No, stay there. Write your name again."

While Miller wrote, Pagano took the wallet from the desk and dug out the driver's license. *Nice*, Wolfson thought. *Very nice*. Over Pagano's shoulder, he compared the signature on the card with the writing on the board. They matched.

"You're pretty good at that blackboard," Pagano observed. "Some guys would have that chalk squeaking like a mouse. But not you. You sure you're not a school teacher or something?"

"Well . . . I've had some experience with blackboards," the little man said. He still faced away from them.

"Really?" Pagano said.

"Yes. Before my company sent me out here I was teaching some of the younger men, the sales trainees."

"But you never did any teaching at a school?"

"No."

Wolfson walked to the blackboard. "Here's another name. I want you to write 'Frederick Lerner'. Would you do that for me?"

The hand—swung up without hesitation. It wrote the name in the same sure, graceful way.

"Uh-huh," Wolfson said. He went back to Pagano and gestured at the

folder. Pagano opened it, and Wolfson removed another photo. He set it face up on the desk under the unlit lamp. "You can come back now, Mr. Miller. Have a seat."

The little man returned to the desk, blinking in confusion at them. He sat down wearily.

Wolfson pointed at the lamp. "Mind turning on the light? I want to show you something."

Miller snapped on the switch and then started, his hands gripping the arms of the chair. He was staring down at the photograph, a slow flush staining his face. "Where did you get that?" he asked.

"From our files," said Wolfson. He and Pagano edged closer to the desk. "It's a picture of a man named Frederick Lerner. He killed two women in Santa Barbara last week."

"But — but that's a picture of me," Miller protested. He picked it up and stared. "That's *me*."

Pagano took the photo out of his hands. "The Los Angeles police got it from the yearbook of that private school where you used to teach."

Miller shook his head. "That's impossible. I was never in Santa Barbara in my life. Anybody can tell you that, anybody!"

"Can they?" Pagano said. "How about your new wife? Can she tell us that?"

Miller turned pale, almost the color of the photograph. He lowered

his eyes and brought a cupped hand to his forehead. "There's been a mistake," he mumbled. "You've got me mixed up with someone else."

Pagano dropped down in the chair beside him. "Where'd you get that wallet, Lerner? Who is Charles Miller?"

"I'm Charles Miller!" The little man seemed close to tears. "You can ask my friends, my business associates. They can tell you."

Pagano leaned closer. "I think you're a liar. You killed those two women, and you came up here to hide. Look at me!"

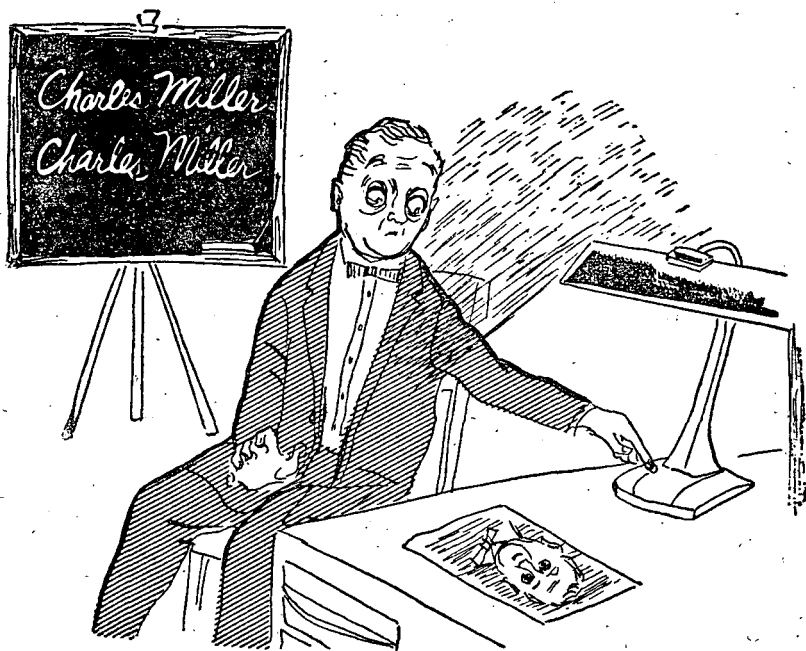
"It's all a mistake! Can't you see that?"

Pagano's voice grew louder, more insistent. "I think you should make a statement. I think you should tell us about those two women."

"I don't know what you're talking about!"

Wolfson interceded. "Take it easy, Sy. We still don't have a positive identification."

"This guy is Frederick Lerner. The photo matches, he lied about having a wife, and he used that blackboard like a pro. I say book him."



Wolfson thought it over. For a moment he wished he had never recognized the man, had walked right by him.

"What do we do?" Pagano pressed. "Lock him up or let him run? Come on, buddy, make up your mind."

Wolfson looked down at the little man. He was holding the photograph of Lerner again, studying it with dull incomprehension.

"Okay, we book him. I'm still not as sure as you are, but we can't take a chance."

"Take my word," Pagano said. "Everything checks."

"Let's go, Mr. Miller," Wolfson touched him gently on the shoulder. "First stop is Fingerprints."

Miller nodded. He stood up and groped his way toward the door.

Pagano leaned against the windowsill, slapping the file angrily against his hip. "When you're finished," he said, "bring him back. I'm going to try L.A. again."

He was beginning to dial the phone when Wolfson closed the door.

In the fingerprint office Miller was disinterested as they rolled his fingers on the inked glass. Wolfson sat in a corner, smoking a cigarette and thinking. Something was wrong; Charles Miller—or whatever his name was—was too mild, too apathetic for a murderer.

A minute later there was a soft knocking at the door and Pagano looked in. "Wolfson? Could I see you?"

Wolfson followed him out, stamping his cigarette into the scarred floor. "You reach L.A.?"

"Yeah." Pagano didn't look at him directly. "They picked up Frederick Lerner last night."

"What!"

"Caught him hiding out in a friend's place near the U.C.L.A. campus. It's him, no chance of error."

Wolfson tried not to show his relief. "How do you like that!" he said. "The guy looks just like him. The two could be twins."

Pagano sighed and held up his hands. "We goofed. We've done it before, we'll do it again. Look, you want to explain things to our friend in there? I'm not good on apologies. Tell him we're sorry, we made a mistake, the works." He grinned sourly. "You were always the diplomat. And give him a lift back to the hotel. He looks like he's gonna collapse any minute."

It was a silent drive to the Golden Gate. Miller sat brooding in the front seat, completely withdrawn. He had taken Wolfson's apology blankly, once or twice looking at the smudge marks on his fingers.

"Tell you what," Wolfson said, trying to brighten the atmosphere.

"We'll have a drink at the hotel. On me."

Miller shook his head. "No, thanks. You don't have to do that."

"All right, but don't worry about anything. Nobody will ever know it happened. We didn't put you on the blotter so there's no record."

In the lobby of the Golden Gate Wolfson managed an awkward good-bye and sent the little man toward the bank of elevators. When the doors slid closed he breathed a sigh of relief. The next time he would think twice before taking someone in for questioning.

He was about to leave when he heard his name being paged. There was a telephone call for him at the main desk.

Pagano was on the line. "Thought I could catch you there. On a hunch, I called Miller's place on Lombard. His wife answered."

Wolfson frowned. "I thought he said she was in Nevada."

"He lied. She's going to Nevada all right, but not to visit any friends. Reno, Nevada."

"She's divorcing him?"

"That's right. You should have

heard her on the phone. Sounds like a real swinger. She says it broke him up pretty bad but she doesn't care. Guess it was one of those May and December things."

"The poor guy," Wolfson said. "And we didn't make matters any easier for him."

"Yeah. Well, I thought you'd be interested. That'll be the last you'll ever hear of Mr. Charles Miller."

"Okay, Sy. Thanks."

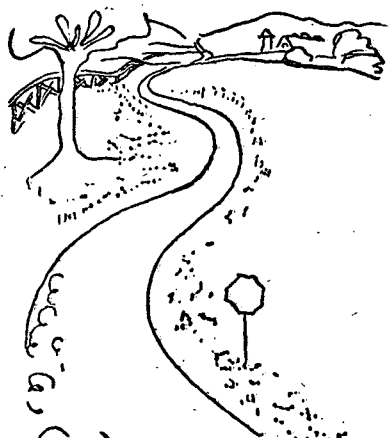
He hung up and walked across the lobby to the doors on Powell Street. Well, it all figured. That's why Miller had seemed so indifferent and apathetic, even before he was asked to go downtown.

Outside, all along the curb, a crowd was beginning to gather. Cars had stopped and people were running up from the shops on Geary. Curious, Wolfson pushed through the door and looked up the steep stone slope of the hotel building. Miller stood on a ledge high up near the top, looking down at the crowd.

Now he knew why the little man had wanted a room on the twelfth floor.

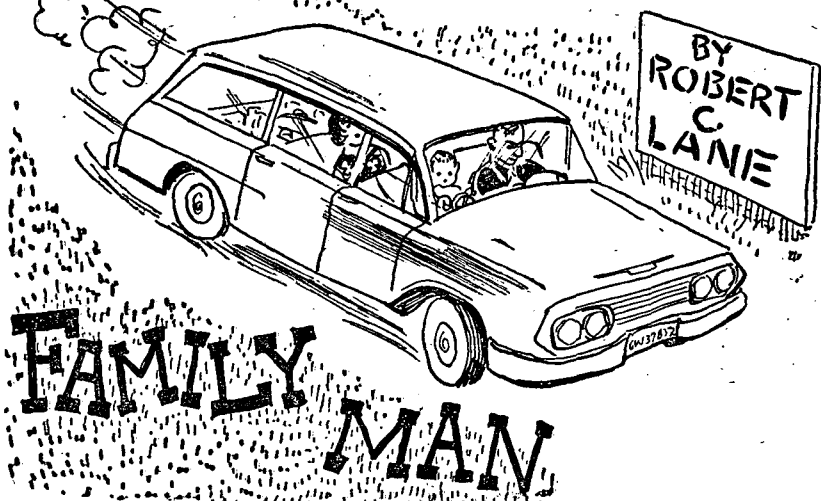


*One invariably regards a trademark as a commercial distinction,
yet a female often is identified via an ingenious personal stamp.*



It was growing light in the east when I wheeled off the highway into the narrow country road. The weather-beaten sign said "Lost Lake" and this sounded like exactly what I needed—lost!

I'd been driving fast, trying to put as many miles between me and St. Louis as possible. The voice on the car radio had given a complete description of my car, 1964 two-door, light blue, bullet holes in rear window. I had to get it off the road before daylight.



The dirt road wandered through heavily wooded Ozark country and then, in the first rays of the sun, I saw the lake on my right. I pulled into a thick clump of blackjack.

The day was already warming and I knew it was going to be another hot one. There wasn't a house or a living soul in sight. Being sweaty and gritty from the hard driving, I stripped and waded into the cool water. It relaxed and revived me, and when I came out I pried a hub cap off, filled it with water and carried it back to the car. I stood in front of the side view mirror and scraped away at my beard until I looked fairly presentable. By that time I was dry, and I put on clean shorts, socks, and sport shirt with the slacks I'd been wearing. I curled up in the back seat for a little shut-eye before deciding on my next course of action, but before falling asleep I carefully draped my jacket with the gun in the pocket over the back of the seat so it would be handy.

I hadn't known until I heard it on the radio a couple of hours after the heist, that the guy I'd blasted was an off duty cop. It was just my luck. It had looked like such an easy heist that a ten-year-old could have pulled it with a cap pistol. But things don't always work out that way, especially for me.

I had pulled out of New York

with my pockets pretty well loaded, and had told the guys in L.A. that I'd be there in plenty of time for the big job they had planned. But I'd run into this "friendly little game" in Columbus and it had left me with just enough money for a tankful of gas and a hamburger. The liquor store in the neighborhood shopping center had looked so easy. Then that guy with a bagful of groceries had walked into the store and havoc had busted loose. It must have been the little clerk in the store who let go at me with the cop's gun when I pulled away. I glanced up at the rear window where two neat and very obvious bullet holes told the story of last night; that, and about twelve hundred liquor store dollars that were stashed in my clothing.

When I woke up the sun was high in the sky. Voices came to me from a distance. I grabbed the gun and was out of the car in an instant. It sounded like a woman's voice, and then I heard what I took to be the voice of a child.

I slipped my jacket on and kept my hand on the rod while I stepped clear of the trees. There, across a narrow neck of water, was a woman and a little boy. They were spreading a tablecloth on the ground close to the shore, and behind them was a white station wagon. I couldn't see anyone but them.

The woman brought a picnic basket from the car, and while they ate I worked my way around the neck of the lake without being seen. I put the station wagon between us while I inspected it. It was well loaded; the back contained a play pen, half a dozen suitcases and cardboard boxes. The car bore Missouri plates, but they were evidently either returning from or starting on a long trip. There was a pillow in the play pen, a bunch of interlocking plastic blocks scattered around, a stuffed panda, and a kid's picture book. One of those little hook-on seats for kids hung on the front seat next to the driver.

I couldn't help grinning; my luck was changing! Here was the perfect cover—a woman and a kid and a good serviceable car, unwanted by the cops. We'd be just a happy little family sailing along the highways on a nice summer day.

I was smoothing my hair down with my hand, glad that I'd washed and shaved, when the woman stood up and started to gather up the things she'd spread for the picnic. I could hear the kid's voice raised in a teasing chant, "Fwim! Wanna fwim, Mama!"

The woman was carrying the picnic things toward the car but I was still hidden from her view. "You can swim at the motel tonight," she called back over her

shoulder. "Aren't you in a hurry to get to California and see daddy?"

I put on my most disarming smile as I stepped from behind the car. "Hello," I said.

She stopped in surprise and looked at me warily; she forced a thin smile. "You surprised me," she said. "I didn't think there was anyone around here."

The kid ran up to his mother, but stopped short when he saw me.

"I didn't mean to frighten you," I said, and I kept the friendly smile on my face. I don't usually scare women. In fact, I have no trouble attracting them, and I was sure this one would follow the same pattern.

She was inspecting me carefully, while I did the same with her. She was dressed in a light cotton dress that showed off a smooth and firmly rounded figure. Her black hair was cut short and formed a sort of helmet of loose ringlets around her tanned and attractive face.

"My car broke down," I said, "and I wondered if you might give me a lift to the nearest garage."

She took the kid's hand and approached the tailgate of the car. As she repacked the picnic gear she seemed to be debating with herself. At last she said, rather tentatively, "I'm going west on the highway. Do you think there'll be a garage in that direction? Maybe if you could get

a ride back toward St. Louis there would be more—”

“I’m going west myself,” I cut in. “There’s a garage not far from here. You can let me out there.” I recharged the smile. “If you don’t mind, that is?”

She swung the tailgate shut decisively. “All right,” she said. “I can’t leave you stranded here.”

She put the boy in the tot-seat next to her and buckled him in, then indicated I should get in the seat behind. As she started the motor she asked, “Where is your car?”

“Other side of the lake,” I answered. “I was fishing and the darn thing wouldn’t start.”

Her eyes swung to mine in the rear view mirror and I realized I didn’t make a very convincing picture of the Ozark fisherman. “Actually it was just a rest stop,” I said. “Fishing relaxes me after a long drive.”

The boy twisted in his seat and regarded me with solemn eyes.

“Hi,” I said to him. “What’s your name?”

“Jimmy”

“Jimmy what?”

“Talmadge,” the woman said. “I’m Mrs. Talmadge.”

“Did I hear you say you were going to California?”

Her eyes went to the mirror again. “Did I say that?”

“When you were talking to the boy back there at the lake, I thought I heard you mention California.”

“Yes,” she said. “We’re going to join my husband there.”

She had swung the car back onto the highway now and was gunning it along pretty good. I had the feeling she was uneasy and a little frightened by my presence. I didn’t want to scare her until I had to, then when I did, it would be that much more effective.

I made my voice easy and confidential. “Where you from, Mrs. Talmadge?”

“St. Louis,” she answered.

“I’m from back east,” I said. “Are you going to live in California?”

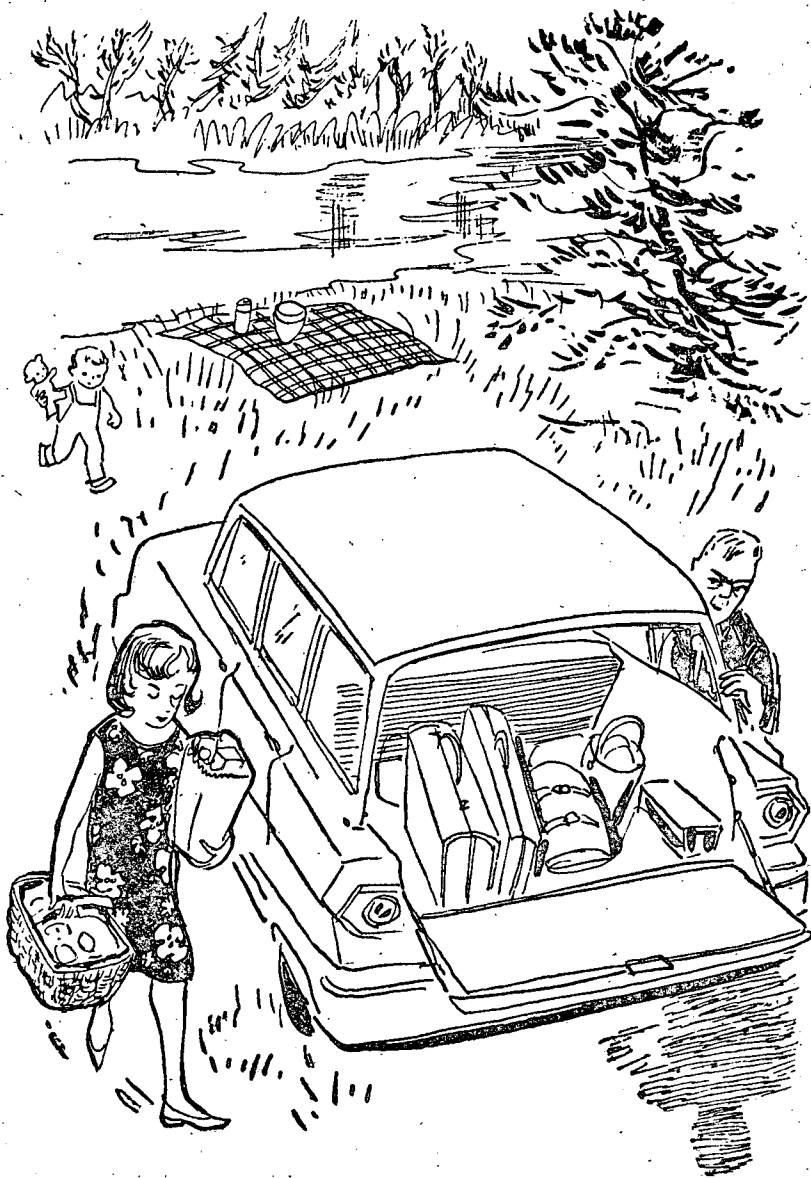
“Yes, in Los Angeles.”

“You’ll like it there,” I said. “I’m headed for L.A. too; just a business trip for me, though.” After a short pause, I chuckled. “My manners are bad, I’m afraid. My name is Miles.”

Yeah, Miles—like what I had to put between me and St. Louis!

She acknowledged my self-intro with a nod of her head, and I could see her eyes flick back and forth to the mirror.

We rode on for maybe ten minutes and then she motioned to a roadside sign. “There you are, Mr. Miles,” she said. “Jackson’s Garage,



two miles." There was a sound of relief in her voice. "I didn't think we'd find one so soon."

Now, I told myself. Now! I pressed the muzzle of the gun into the back of her neck just where the black curls ended. "Don't stop, lady," I said. "Keep going."

I heard the sharp intake of her breath and her eyes widened.

"Don't panic," I said, and I made my voice hard and low. "You've got a passenger for L.A."

The knuckles of her hands were white on the steering wheel. "What—what do you—"

"I need this car," I said. "And I need you and the kid for traveling companions. Behave yourself and you won't get hurt." I removed the gun from her neck and lowered it behind the seat. "Just do as I say from now on and everything will be okay."

Jackson's Garage appeared at the crest of a hill and we swept on past without slowing.

Her eyes sought mine again in the mirror. "Please get out," she said. "Let me stop along here somewhere. You can get a ride with someone else. Please!"

I grinned at her. "You and the kid are my best insurance," I said. "My *only* insurance."

Her voice quavered. "Are the— the police after you?"

I chuckled. "Like a swarm of

mad bees on a midsummer day."

We drove on in silence for a few moments, and then suddenly, "Mama, I gotta go."

I hadn't thought of this complication.

"Gotta go, Mama," he persisted.

She put a protective hand out to him while I leaned forward and examined the instrument panel. "We'll need gas soon anyway," I said. "I'll tell you where to stop. You take the kid to the rest room while I get the tank filled; I'll do the driving after that." I raised the gun to her neck again and touched her gently with its cold steel. "Don't forget this," I said. "I'll use it on both of you if you try anything crazy."

I reached over the seat and picked up her purse. "You won't need this," I said.

"What do you want with it?" she protested. "I might need some coins, or—or a comb or something."

I grinned and dumped the contents of the purse on the seat beside me. It held the usual stuff: a wallet, coin purse, comb, mirror, lipstick, a bottle of aspirin, the stub of an eyebrow pencil, a small pack of tissues, a pen and address book, some chewing gum, a sheet of green trading stamps, and some bandages.

The wallet contained about thirty dollars and some travelers' checks. I glanced at her driver's license and

identification card: Myra Talmadge, age 28. The photo didn't do her justice. I fished out the lipstick, the pen, and the stub of eyebrow pencil and dropped them into my jacket pocket. "We don't want any messages left on paper towels or washroom mirrors, do we?" I asked pleasantly. I scooped the rest of the junk back into the bag and tossed it onto the front seat.

"I gotta go," the boy said again, this time with more urgency.

There was a small gas station and a general store ahead on our right, and I directed her to pull up there. I patted the gun before slipping it into my pocket. "Remember, Myra—*no tricks!*"

She set her lips into a thin line and nodded her head. "No tricks," she repeated.

She stopped beside the pump and unbuckled the strap of the tot-seat. I got out and stood beside her as she lifted the kid to the ground. The attendant directed her to the wash room, and removed the cap of the gas tank. "Fill 'er up for ya, Mister?"

I nodded. "Check the oil and tires, too," I said. Then I walked quickly to the men's room, and was back before Myra and the boy came out. I suddenly realized I hadn't eaten since the hamburger I'd had early last night; I guess the excitement had kept me so keyed up that

I hadn't noticed it, but now my empty stomach suddenly rumbled demandinglly.

There was still no sign of Jimmy and his mother so I hurried into the little general store and bought some candy bars and a bag of peanuts.

We arrived back at the car at the same moment. I said, "I'll drive for a while, honey. You and Jimmy get in the back and take a little nap." I gave the attendant a ten-dollar bill and slipped into the driver's seat, while Myra and the boy obediently climbed into the back.

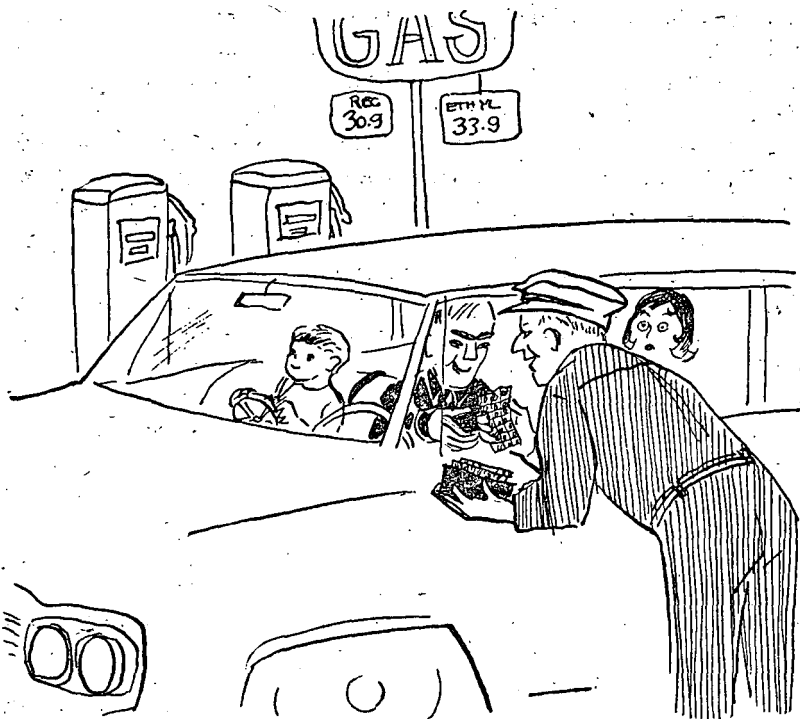
The attendant returned with the change and counted it into my hand. "And here's your trading stamps, mister. Thank you, and come back."

I passed the stamps back to Myra. "Here you are, darling, for your collection."

The attendant grinned. "The ladies sure do go for them stamps, don't they?"

"They sure do." I glanced at Myra and winked broadly. "She wants to kill me whenever I forget 'em." Her expression told me the irony was not lost on her.

When we were under way again I switched on the car radio, unwrapped a candy bar and began to munch on it. The music was soothing. Myra had put the kid in the playpen, and he curled up and



went to sleep almost immediately. It was nearly noon now and the day was becoming uncomfortably hot.

At twelve the news came on the air. After a long-winded commercial, I suddenly sat upright and turned up the volume. Here it was:

... still being sought by police is the killer of an off duty St. Louis policeman during the holdup of a Northside liquor store last night. A car bearing New York plates and answering the description of the getaway car was found abandoned an hour ago in the wooded lake

area two hundred miles southwest of the city. Early this morning a car was reported stolen in that same vicinity, and it is now thought the killer is traveling west in the stolen car. Highway patrol forces in Kansas and Oklahoma have been alerted. The man is armed and is considered dangerous. The car is described as a green 1960 four-door sedan, Missouri license number . . .

I switched it off and grinned. Some young punk in a green car was going to get the surprise of his life. And me, I was now the head of a

family, traveling in a loaded white station wagon. Yes, sir, my luck had changed for sure!

Myra spoke up from the rear seat and there was a note of hope in her voice. "That means you're safe, doesn't it? You can let us go! Take the car if you think you need it, but you can let us go."

"Not so fast, baby," I laughed. "They'll have that sedan by six o'clock. It'll probably turn out to be some kooky kid, and they'll know they grabbed the wrong guy." I looked at her in the mirror. "No, baby, we're staying together—all the way!" I looked over my shoulder directly into her eyes. "You know what they do to cop killers, don't you?"

She nodded, and tears sparkled in her eyes.

"But they can only walk me into that gas chamber once—just *once*—whether I've killed a cop or a whole army of people."

She lapsed into silence then as we drove on through the hot afternoon. I took secondary roads to avoid the toll stations, and carefully observed the speed limits; it slowed me down but it was a lot safer that way.

After an hour the kid woke up, and of course he had to go again. Sometimes I think kids do that just out of pure nastiness.

"I—I think I'd like to stop too,"

Myra said. "I'd like to freshen up."

"I don't like this," I snapped. Then an idea hit me. "Okay," I said, "but this time I'll take the kid. One phoney caper out of you, lady, and—well, the kid'll be with *me*. You go on in the ladies', and you stay there until I call you. Understand?"

She sighed, but didn't give me any static. I guess she was resigned to the hoplessness of her position.

I stopped at the next small station, and Jimmy and I sat in the car until she disappeared into the ladies' room. Then I took him by the hand and we went into the men's.

The kid looked up at me and laughed at my clumsy efforts to help him, but I joked with him because I didn't want him to start crying and attract attention. When we went out I rapped on the door of the ladies' and Myra came out.

Back on the road, Myra said, "What about tonight? I mean, will we stop somewhere? We'll have to eat."

I had been thinking about this myself. We'd drive straight through, of course, but the candy bars hadn't done much to take up the slack in my stomach.

Presently Myra leaned forward and spoke quietly and earnestly. "Look, Mr. Miles," she said, "you have a gun; you also have my son and you have me and you have my

car. I'll do whatever you say to help get us all to California safely." Her voice and words were brisk and businesslike. "I'll cooperate with you for our mutual safety, but in return you'll have to do a little cooperating too."

I turned my head to her in surprise. "Lady," I said, "the cops of three states are looking for me, and I'm armed and considered dangerous, like the man said. *I* have to cooperate with *you*?"

She hurried on in her strictly business voice. "I promised my husband I'd call him each night before ten o'clock, from wherever we stopped for the night. My husband is a worrier, Mr. Miles. If there's no call, he'll be frantic and notify the police—a complete description of the car and of Jimmy and me."

I swore under my breath. I realized, too late, that I'd taken on more than I'd bargained for, but my common sense told me that the kid and the woman were my only insurance policy and I couldn't be separated from them. Even if it came to a shoot-out, the cops would hold their fire for their sake.

I shrugged resignedly. "Okay, so you gotta call your husband; also we gotta eat tonight. We'll take care of both with one stop. We'll stop at some little diner off the highway, and you can make your

call from there." I paused. "I'll be standing right beside you with the gun in your back while you talk, and you'll tell your old man that everything is just dandy."

"All right," she said. "I'll do what you say."

It was mid-afternoon when we finally crossed into Oklahoma. Once Myra asked me if I didn't want to turn on the radio again for the news. This really bugged me. "No, I *don't* want to turn on the radio and hear the news!" I yelled so loud that the kid began to whimper.

I guess it was the almost certain knowledge the news would be bad that made me act the way I did. They'd surely have caught the green car by now, and the search for me would have been redoubled and intensified. I had enough troubles as it was—a woman, a kid with weak kidneys, and a husband who was a worrier. I didn't need any more to think about just then. I let go with a stream of profanity that shut her up for the next fifty miles.

We had to make two more stops before dinner—first for gas and cokes, and the second for you-know-what. I kept the kid with me both times and we used the same routine as the last time.

It was nine in the evening when I swung into a side road that led to a sleepy little Oklahoma town. I drove slowly down the quiet

main drag and cased the windows of a small cafe. There were only a few people eating inside, so I swung around the corner to a side street and parked the wagon.

"We'll wash up and eat," I said, "and then you can make your call." I surveyed the cafe again when we entered; a couple of people looked up, and then went back to their corn pone and grits.

In the rest room Jimmy said, "Where's motel? I wanna fwim."

"You can swim when we get through driving," I said. "We're going to have dinner now."

"I wanna choklit ice cweam."

"Okay," I said, "you can have it if you're good."

So far I couldn't kick about the way the kid had behaved—except for his lousy kidneys, of course.

The meal was served quickly, and the kid and I both lit into it like someone was going to take it away from us before we finished. Myra sat quietly, with her eyes lowered, and just toyed with the food on her plate.

While Jimmy was digging into his ice cream, Myra and I went to the phone booth in the rear to make the call. I wedged myself into the partially closed door of the booth and pressed the gun-heavy pocket of my jacket against her side. I could hear the ringing through the receiver.

After a minute the voice of the operator said, "I'm ringing your num-ber," and then, "I'm sor-ree, your party does not answer."

Beads of perspiration stood on Myra's forehead when she came out of the booth. "What time is it in California?" she asked.

I looked at my watch and checked it with the clock on the wall. "About seven-thirty," I answered.

"He hasn't come back from dinner yet," she said. "We'll have to call later."

I swore to myself. "There's two hours difference in time," I said. "Did you tell him ten *your* time or ten *his*?"

Her chin trembled. "I—I don't remember; but we'll have to call again."

We collected Jimmy, and I herded them to the cash register and paid the bill. As we turned the corner into the street where I'd parked I saw two men leaning against the car. They straightened when they saw me and one of them shouted something.

I made a grab for my pocket but someone clamped onto my arm from behind and almost paralyzed me.

"No trouble, boy," a voice said. "Let's don't have no trouble."

Myra grabbed the kid and backed against the wall, but there wasn't any need for it; my right arm felt

like it had been caught in a wringer.

At the crummy little police station the big cop was talking to Myra. "We ain't takin' none of the credit, Miz Talmadge. You're the one that oughta be decorated."

I sat, uncomfortable in my handcuffs, and stared at Myra. I couldn't wait to find out what she'd done, how she had conned me down this road that led straight to the gas chamber.

"We knew you were headed this way when they found them 'Help' messages spelled out on the wash-room mirrors where you stopped. But the attendants couldn't give us a description of the car 'cause they didn't know which one it was for sure."

Messages on mirrors? That one jolted me. How could she have left

messages? I had the lipstick and pen and eyebrow pencil in my pockets when they frisked me!

The big cop chuckled and went on. "An' then, when the waitress in the cafe went into the ladies' room an' found it spelled out in plastic blocks, she called us right quick." He paused to light a cigar. "You were the only folks in the cafe that had a little kid with 'em, an' grown-ups don't usually carry build-in' blocks around on 'em."

Myra said, "They were all I could think of, so I slipped some into my purse."

The cop nodded and grinned. "But what puzzles me, little lady, is how come you *switched*—why the blocks?"

Myra lowered her dark lashes. "I—I ran out of trading stamps," she said.



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I want to thank all of you for your interest.

Most sincerely,

Pat Hitchcock

A dead man cannot bite, yet his demise may unleash caustic tongues to inflict deep-seated scars.

STROLLING forward along the promenade deck, Captain Brier saw Miriam Stroude emerge from the entrance hall and cross to a window of the glassed-in section. She paused

her, returning the greetings of passengers who glanced up from their steamer chairs at his large, confidence-inspiring figure in whites, a kindly smile on his broad, rugged



there, staring down at the dazzling blue sea, as still as a mannequin in the white pleated dress he had admired across the dining saloon at breakfast time. He started toward

BY
PATRICK
O'KEEFE

THE GRATEFUL THIEF

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face, a seagoing roll to his walk.

On the previous afternoon the chief officer had invited Miss Stroude, who sat at his table, to take coffee with him and the captain at watch-changing time on the bridge. Captain Brier intended to repeat the invitation, in his own behalf, for that afternoon. As he neared the entrance hall, a young officer, wearing the gold stripe of an assistant purser on his epaulets, hurried out to his side.

"Will you come down to the office right away, sir," he said breathlessly. "Salmon just found Miss Coston murdered in her cabin."

Captain Brier hurried into the hall and down the wide staircase, the assistant purser at his heels. Salmon, a bedroom steward, stood beside the purser's office window, flushed with excitement. The captain glanced inside, snapped, "Where's the purser?"

"I think he went up to his cabin, sir, to wash up for lunch," replied the assistant.

"Tell him to come down to Miss Coston's cabin at once; the doctor, too. Not a word of this to anyone else."

The captain then followed the steward along the port passageway on the same deck, which at that late forenoon hour was deserted. Salmon opened the door of cabin 15, led the way in, and closed the door

again. It was a double-berth room with private bath and smelled of cosmetics. Captain Brier saw Miss Coston the moment he was far enough into the cabin to come within view of the bathroom doorway. She lay on her back across the threshold, eyes staring. She was a pretty woman, thirty perhaps, clad in a pink sleeveless dress. Her short blond hair was damp with blood, and a patch of the brown carpet on which it rested had turned dark.

The captain glanced up at the steward. "How did you happen to find her?"

"I was coming along the passageway, sir, on my way back to cabin 19. I'd just remembered I'd forgotten to fill the water bottle in there. The door of this cabin was swinging to the roll of the ship, like someone had gone in without latching it. I thought Miss Coston or maybe her roommate was in, so I came in to tell them about always latching their doors on ships. I found her like that. I shut the door quickly and beat it along to the pursers' office."

Captain Brier studied Salmon's face as he was replying. The steward was middle-aged and fat under his spotless white jacket, making his first voyage in the "Truxillo".

"Was there anyone else in the passageway?"

"No, sir, except for a little girl

going into one of the rooms when I was heading for the purser's office."

Captain Brier glanced around the cabin. On the glass-topped dressing table stood an assortment of jars and bottles; dresses and blouses hung from hooks, and a plaid bathrobe was draped over a chair. There were no signs of a struggle.

Stepping over the body, the captain inspected the white-tiled bathroom. The door was hooked back, partly concealing half of the tub. In the washbowl, beneath a mirror, lay a wet face cloth stained red, undoubtedly blood. The bottom of the tub was still damp from that forenoon's cleaning by the steward; in the portion behind the door, it was smudged, as if someone had stood there in shoes.

Captain Brier returned to the cabin which, with the fan stopped, was hot and humid; Salmon had loosened the collar of his jacket. The captain stood gazing in thought through one of the two open port-holes, which gave directly onto the sea. They provided a quick means of disposing of a murder weapon bearing fingerprints, though not an escape route. The arc of the cloudless horizon rose and fell to the gentle sway of the ship in the sparkling blue sea, the movement that, according to Salmon, had caused the unlatched door to swing and catch his attention. Plausible enough,

mused the captain. Too plausible?

There was a sharp knock on the door and the purser hurried in, the doctor right behind him. The doctor had evidently come in haste from his cabin as two buttons on his coat were still unfastened. The purser had not stopped to put on his uniform jacket but had rushed down in shirt and white trousers. He was around thirty, but almost completely bald, and wore gold-rimmed spectacles on his thin face. He looked quickly at the body, then glanced away.

The doctor, stout and dignified, white-haired, displayed a shocked but professional calm. After making a cursory examination, he straightened up, red-faced and puffing.

"She was struck a heavy blow on the back of the head, possibly more than once, with a flat weapon of some kind—perhaps not heavy enough to have caused death. Death may have been due to shock."

Light footsteps sounded in the passageway, approaching the door. The captain motioned to Salmon but before the steward could reach for the bolt, a frowning young woman with fluffy dark hair pushed open the door. She was shapely in a yellow dress, and wore gold bangles dangling from both wrists.

"What on earth's keeping you, Fanny?" The young woman stopped on seeing the four men. The captain

stepped past the others and took her by the arm. "Come in, Miss Keeling."

He led her wonderingly to a chair. As she sat down she saw her roommate and opened her mouth as if to scream. The captain grasped her gently by the shoulder. "Easy now, Miss Keeling." He motioned to Salmon to switch on the fan.

"Is she—dead?" she gasped.

"I'm deeply sorry to say that she is. She was found like that several minutes ago."

"I can't believe it! She left the bridge table to come down here for her cigarettes, a special brand of Turkish. I came down to see what was keeping her."

"Did Miss Coston suffer from heart trouble?" inquired the doctor.

Miss Keeling nodded. "Poor Fanny had a slight attack about a month ago." Miss Keeling's arm shot out, pointing at the body. "If you're trying to pass that off as a heart attack—" She jumped up and turned to the dressing table, snatched open the long top drawer.

"It's gone!" she shrieked. "The pearl necklace." She swung around. "I laid it in here last night. It was still there this morning when I got my lipstick out. Now it's gone."

"Apparently Miss Coston surprised a thief and was attacked," observed the captain.

Miss Keeling dropped back into

the chair. "Poor Fanny!" she moaned. "She didn't want me to bring it along on the cruise. She said I was careless with jewelry. I got it out of the purser's safe to wear last night at the get-together dinner. I meant to put it back after breakfast. It's worth over ten thousand dollars."

"It's still on board," said the captain. "The murderer, too. No one will be allowed to leave the ship until after the police have made a thorough investigation in Kingston tomorrow."

Miss Keeling moaned again. "I shouldn't have brought it along. Poor Fanny!"

"I'll arrange for you to be moved into another cabin," said the captain. He turned to Salmon. "Take Miss Keeling up to cabin 6 for the time being. Then report to the chief steward. I'll phone him from my office about transferring Miss Keeling. Don't spread word of this. I don't want passengers crowding down here."

Miss Keeling rose and followed the steward out. The captain then turned to the doctor and the purser. "Doc, wait here. I'll send the chief officer down to arrange with you about moving the body." To the purser he said, "Mr. Frabe, come up to my office with me. I'll need some information from you for making out the radiograms reporting

the murder, names, room numbers."

On arriving with the purser at his office just abaft the bridge, Captain Brier telephoned instructions to the chief officer and the chief steward, and then sank into the leather-upholstered chair beside his desk.

"A fine thing to happen on the third day of the cruise!" he said grimly. "It'll not only cast a gloom over the ship, but cause her to be delayed tomorrow in Kingston—unless we can find out who did it before then."

"I think I have a pretty good idea who it was," said the purser. "I thought it better not to say anything in front of the others down in cabin 15, but not long before Salmon found Miss Coston, I saw Miriam Stroude sneaking out of cabin 15."

"Miriam Stroude! Sneaking out!"

"That's how it looked to me. I was standing just inside the doorway of cabin 11, returning a book I'd borrowed from John Granger." The purser grinned sheepishly. "O.K., so it was a book on the stock market. You won't think me so crazy when I make a killing. Besides, if I hadn't been interested in the stock market, I wouldn't have been there to see what I'm telling you about. Granger wasn't in his cabin, so I left the book on the table just inside the doorway. Another book

lying on it caught my eye, on Speculation. I started to leaf through it when I heard someone out in the passageway. Holding the door open with my foot, I looked out casually and saw Miriam Stroude walking away from cabin 15. She had come out so quietly I wouldn't have heard her if I hadn't had the door open."

"Salmon said he found the door of cabin 15 swinging—unlatched."

"It's obvious why. She pulled it to so gently it didn't quite catch. The first good roll to that side opened it again."

"But Miriam Stroude! You're sure she came out of 15?"

"Absolutely." The purser took a handkerchief from his hip pocket and began wiping his spectacles. "It's hard to believe of her, I know; a good dancer, popular, chased by all the wolves. Have you noticed, though, she never lets herself be monopolized by one man? She circulates, keeps to herself a lot. That gives her plenty of freedom to slip off somewhere anytime she wishes. She's listed as a private secretary, but I've been wondering if she might be a high-class jewel thief. I was thinking of mentioning it to you. Now, after seeing her sneak out of cabin 15—" The purser shrugged.

"But murder!"

The purser put on his glasses.

"Not intentional. Probably hit her from behind so as to get out without being recognized."

"Did she see you?"

"I don't think so. She was walking away in the other direction, toward her own cabin."

Captain Brier reached for the telephone beside his desk. "I'll send for her."

He telephoned the chief steward to send a bellboy in search of Miss



Stroude with a request that she come with him to the captain's office. "Has word of the murder got around?" the captain asked.

"No, sir. Miss Keeling was too upset to say anything about it going up to cabin 6, and Salmon has kept his mouth shut. But it'll be all over the ship pretty soon, when the body is taken down below and my men start moving out Miss Keeling's

things. The word gets around fast."

A few minutes later a sallow-faced boy ushered Miriam Stroude in from the sunny deck. She had an abundance of brown hair, tossed awry by the head breeze, and there was the scent of violets about her. She glanced curiously at the captain and then at the purser seated opposite him. The captain rose and led her to a chair; as he sat down again, he came straight to the point.

"Miss Stroude, would you mind telling me if you were in cabin 15 during the past twenty minutes or so?"

She hesitated, looked embarrassed. "I suppose it was cabin 15. I didn't notice. It was very stupid of me. I was in a daydream and opened the wrong door by mistake. They're so much alike. Someone apparently saw me and reported it. I'm really most sorry."

"Did you go far enough into the cabin to be able to see into the bathroom?"

"I must admit that I was well into the cabin before I realized I wasn't in my own."

"Did anyone else enter while you were in there?"

She shook her head. "No one." She paused, as if perplexed. "Is there something wrong?"

"Miss Stroude, shortly after you left cabin 15, Miss Coston was found brutally murdered in the

bathroom doorway. Also, a valuable pearl necklace is missing."

Miriam Stroude looked stunned. "Then I'm being accused?"

"Not accused, merely questioned. Mr. Frabe saw you leaving Miss Coston's cabin. I wished to have his statement verified."

"Then if he saw me leaving, he must have seen Miss Coston go in immediately afterward." Miriam Stroude turned anxiously to the purser. "She came down the stairs from the lounge as I was going to my cabin. I stopped to speak to her. She hurried past me, saying she'd left her bridge game to get some cigarettes from her cabin and was in a hurry to get back."

The purser shook his head at the captain. "I didn't see Miss Coston. As I told you, I only looked out of cabin 11 for a second when I heard Miss Stroude sneak out of cabin 15."

"If you heard me sneak out, as you put it," said Miriam Stroude sharply, "you must surely have heard Miss Coston going in. I hardly think she sneaked into her own cabin."

The purser ignored her and addressed the captain. "I definitely did not hear Miss Coston go into her cabin."

"Miss Stroude," pursued the captain, "did anyone see you and Miss Coston in the passageway?"

"I really can't say. I didn't look

back as Miss Coston hurried by me. I do know that there was no one in sight ahead of me."

"You went straight to your cabin?"

"Yes. I remained there a little while and then went up to the promenade-deck."

The captain nodded. "I saw you come out of the entrance hall." He turned to the purser. "How soon after seeing Miss Stroude did you leave Mr. Granger's cabin?"

"Not more than a minute at the most, I'd say."

"In that time Miss Stroude could have reached her cabin and no longer been in sight. Miss Coston, too, could have reached her cabin and been out of sight. What about Salmon? Did you see him?"

"No, sir. There wasn't a soul in the passageway when I went along it to go up to my room. I was just getting ready to wash up for lunch when you sent for me. I didn't wait—came down just as I was."

"It would seem, then, that between the time you left the passageway and Salmon came into it, someone went into cabin 15, killed Miss Coston, stole the pearls and, so far as we know now, left unseen."

"The thief could have been in one of the adjoining cabins on either side," Miss Stroude said. There was desperation in her brown eyes. "He could have dodged into

cabin 15 and out again in a short time."

"There's another possibility," said the captain. "The thief may have been in Miss Coston's cabin all along."

"Miss Stroude would have seen him," said the purser.

"Not if he were hiding behind the bathroom door."

"That's it!" cried Miriam Stroude. "The thief heard me coming and hid behind the bathroom door. Miss Coston caught him in there."

"Then why didn't I hear her go in," queried the purser, "if I heard Miss Stroude sneak out? It seems to me that Miss Coston went into her cabin just before I got to Mr. Granger's."

"I definitely passed her on the way to my cabin," said Miriam Stroude. "She was not in hers when I entered it."

Captain Brier reflected that if Miriam Stroude knew that Miss Coston had left the bridge game to get cigarettes, she was presumably telling the truth. Another point in her favor was the fact that she was still wearing the attractive white pleated dress she had worn at breakfast. The captain glanced at his bald, bespectacled purser and wondered whether it was more than haste that had caused him to come down to cabin 15 without his jacket.

The captain suddenly rose. "I have a theory I'd like to try out. It shouldn't take long, so please remain here, Miss Stroude. You come along with me, Mr. Frabe. I'll need your help."

The captain and the purser went out by the door leading to the passageway running across the officers' quarters. The captain halted



abreast the purser's cabin and opened the door. They went inside and the captain closed the door again. He glanced around. On the leather-cushioned settee was a white uniform jacket with only one epaulet in place; the other, together with brass buttons, lay beside it.

"Where's the jacket you were wearing when you saw Miss Stroude leaving cabin 15?"

The purser turned white. He gestured at the settee. "That's it.

I was putting a fresh set of trimmings on it when you sent for me. I didn't stop to finish."

The captain stepped over to the clothes-locker door and opened it. Peering inside, he stooped and brought out a rolled-up white bundle. He unrolled it. It was a uniform jacket bare of epaulets and buttons; on the front were some red stains. The captain eyed the purser grimly.

"Where are the pearls, Mr. Frabe?"

His face now ghastly, the purser opened the top drawer of a brown filing cabinet, and from under a heap of forms he drew out a long, narrow manila envelope. He handed it to the captain. Captain Brier raised the flap and glanced inside, then looked up at the purser.

"Mr. Frabe, I'm confining you to your cabin until the police arrive on board tomorrow."

"Captain, please, give me a break." The purser eyed the captain piteously through his gold-rimmed glasses. "I didn't kill her. It was her heart. You heard what Doc said."

"I also heard Miss Keeling say her necklace was missing."

"I've taken heavy losses in the market. I'm in deep with loan sharks to cover margin calls. They threatened me if I didn't pay up soon."

"You tried to frame Miriam

Stroude for Miss Coston's murder."

"It wouldn't have happened if it hadn't been for her," said the purser bitterly. "When I heard her coming, I thought it must be Salmon coming back to do something he'd forgotten. I'd left Miss Coston and Miss Keeling up at the bridge game. I took a chance and hopped behind the bathroom door. If he'd come in there, I'd have pretended I was checking for a leak reported in the cabin underneath, but it was Miss Stroude. She didn't wander in by mistake. She headed straight for the dressing table. I saw her go by, through the crack between the door hinges. I couldn't see her at the dressing table, but I could hear her. I heard her open the drawer. I heard her close it again and then hurry to the door and out. She's a high-class jewel thief. No doubt about it."

"Then why didn't she take the necklace?"

"She must have thought she heard someone coming. It wouldn't have washed to say she'd gone in by mistake if the pearls were found missing. I thought she'd beaten me to them, so I looked for something else worth taking. The pearls were still there. I'd just slipped them into my pocket when I heard someone coming again. There wasn't time to put them back into the drawer. I dodged behind the bathroom door again. It was Miss Coston."

The purser swept his hand miserably over his bald head. "She came into the bathroom. I panicked. I grabbed up the long-handled bath brush and hit her before she could look around and see me. I had to hit her twice."

"It's a pity you didn't do your panicking before you went into cabin 15," said the captain grimly.

"Captain," pleaded the purser, "don't let me down. No one will know. I'll throw my jacket overboard after dark. That's what I planned to do. No one saw the stains on it. I came up from cabin 15 with it folded over my arm, as though I'd left my office without bothering to put it on. Let that fancy jewel thief get out of it on her own. No one will suspect me. Even if I am suspected, I'd leave you out of it. I wouldn't let you down."

"Mr. Frabe, I feel very sorry for you, but I cannot help you."

Captain Brier then rolled up the jacket and went out with it tucked under his arm. He paused in thought for a few moments in the passageway before returning to his office. If the purser hadn't lied in saying that Miriam Stroude went to the dressing table drawer, she must, indeed, be a jewel thief. That would be something for the police to look into tomorrow. Meanwhile, it might not be amiss to question her himself about the drawer.

Captain Brier found Miriam Stroude seated as he had left her, permeating his office with the scent of violets. She glanced up hopefully. The captain tossed the jacket onto the top of a filing cabinet. Opening the top drawer of his desk, he slid the manila envelope into it and closed the drawer again. Then he dropped back into the swivel chair and met her intensely curious eyes.

"The pearl necklace," he said, nodding at the top drawer.

She looked startled. "Where did you find it?"

"In the purser's cabin."

"You mean—?" she stopped, as if too incredulous to finish.

"He was the man behind the bathroom door. There was a blood-stained face cloth in the washbowl. I surmised that the thief had got some blood on his hands; perhaps some had spurted on his face too, and maybe his clothing. Salmon's jacket was spotless, as is the white dress you've worn all forenoon. The purser was in shirtsleeves. That's his jacket rolled up, blood-stained. Trying to throw suspicion on you was a big mistake; it placed him near cabin 15 around the time Miss Coston was murdered. I might not have suspected him otherwise."

Miriam Stroude took in a long breath. "Captain Brier," she said earnestly, "you certainly got me off a pretty nasty hook. I can't tell

you how very grateful I am to you."

"Miss Stroude," asked the captain, watching her face, "why did you hold back the fact that you went to the dressing table drawer in cabin 15?"

"The purser told you," she replied awkwardly. "I'm sorry. I really should have mentioned it, but I didn't wish to appear even more stupid by admitting that I actually got so far as opening a drawer before discovering I was in the wrong cabin."

"It was very unwise of you to withhold it. The police would have forced that admission from you tomorrow, had they been obliged to find the murderer. It would have been most damning."

"I realize that now," Miriam Stroude admitted.

"I'm sorry I had to call you up here for questioning, Miss Stroude. Under the circumstances, I was obliged to do so. It was an unpleasant duty. I hope you'll understand."

She rose. "Please don't apologize for what my stupidity brought about." She glanced toward the top drawer of the captain's desk. "Miss Keeling is going to be so happy and relieved when you take the necklace down to her."

Captain Brier eyed his passenger for a moment before replying. "That's for the police to do to-

morrow. I'll tell her, of course, that it's been recovered and is safe in my desk."

"She'll be very grateful to you, I'm sure."

Miriam Stroude then stepped out into the midday sunshine. As the odor of violets slowly faded from his office, Captain Brier remained standing, frowning at his thoughts. If Miriam Stroude is a jewel thief, she is also a good actress. Stupid? Or clever? That glance toward his desk drawer, and the remark that Miss Keeling would be happy to get the necklace back, may have been intended to learn the future disposition of the necklace. If she had really been frightened away in her first attempt to steal it, she might be considering a second attempt. And if she were so bold as to try to take it from his desk, he knew the time she was most likely to choose. It was well that he hadn't invited her to afternoon coffee.

Captain Brier had lunch served in his quarters, wishing to avoid a barrage of questions from excited passengers. The chief steward had telephoned that he was virtually under siege in his office down by the dining saloon. The captain spent most of the afternoon attending to the radiograms reporting the murder, and then reading over and signing papers and documents pertaining to the "Truxillo's" arrival on

the following day at Kingston, her first Caribbean port of call. At about a quarter to four, he stepped out on deck and casually glanced aft along the boat deck. A number of passengers were sunning themselves in steamer chairs toward the after end; nearer to the bridge, close to the sign barring passengers from that section, stood Miriam Stroude, gazing seawards. She had changed into tan slacks, a loose, flamboyant blouse and, Captain Brier noted grimly, white canvas shoes with rubber soles.

He strolled toward the wing of the bridge and turned into the wheelhouse. The moment he was inside, he picked up speed. To the chief and second officers chatting by the percolating coffee pot, he said, "I'll be back in a few minutes," and then hurried through a doorway into the officers' quarters and along the passageway to his office. He crossed into his livingroom and stood to one side of the curtain screening the entrance.

Presently his office dimmed briefly as someone came in from the deck, momentarily blocking the sunlight; then followed the sound of the desk drawer being opened, the rustle of paper, the drawer being closed again. Captain Brier stepped from behind the curtain. Miriam Stroude, clutching a small leather handbag, was hastening toward the

door to the deck. She halted, her face startled.

"Another daydream, of course," said the captain. "The cabins are so much alike."

"You were expecting me."

The captain gave a wry smile. "Another theory of mine. The purser suspects you of being a jewel thief. He thinks something frightened you out of cabin 15 this forenoon. If true, then you were likely to try again, and you'd naturally choose the time I'd be absent for coffee."

"What do you intend to do now?"

"Call in the chief officer to be a witness to the opening of your handbag."

Captain Brier strode past her toward the telephone beside his desk.

"Before you ring, Captain Brier, I suggest you look in your desk drawer."

Captain Brier eyed his passenger curiously, then opened the top drawer of the desk. The long manila envelope still lay intact. He lifted its flap and glanced inside. Then he closed the drawer again. "I'm curious about the flaw in my theory," he said.

"It was based on a wrong fact. The purser's suspicion about me is correct, but the necklace he gave you was a cheap string of mine which I happened to have along with me.

It resembles Miss Keeling's except for the diamond clasp. I substituted it for hers. Having a perverted sense of humor, I enjoyed the vision of Miss Keeling discovering the switch, and then trying to convince all concerned that she wasn't introducing some new scheme for defrauding insurance companies and shipping lines.

"The purser complicated matters. Had it been left for the police to return the wrong necklace, Miss Keeling would have spotted the switch immediately. That would have been most embarrassing to you. Miss Keeling undoubtedly would have accused you, and others would surely have had their doubts. I couldn't have let that happen to you without hating myself. So I came in now and switched the strings again."

"That was a very generous act," murmured Captain Brier.

"I had to express my gratitude in this way," she went on, "because I couldn't have gone to you with the truth without incriminating myself. I was forced to do so now to spare you the embarrassment of bringing a false charge against me.

"To spare you further embarrassment, I intend leaving your ship tomorrow in Kingston and flying back to New York. I want to thank you again now, Captain Brier. I have a police record, so you can imagine how slim my chances would have been if I'd been charged with the murder. I'll also take this opportunity to say good-bye to you."

Miriam Stroude then walked out into the late afternoon sunshine, and the fragrance of violets slowly faded from the office.

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The Publisher

The following is, of course, currently anachronistic, but could it, perhaps, be premontory?

HOME of Contention



IN the parlor of her ancestral home, Mrs. Marta Phillips-Smith was knitting a sweater for her husband Theodore, maintaining all the while a steady stream of conversation with Grandmother Prue, who was sitting beside her on the antique Twentieth

Century sofa, staring into space.

"It was a lovely funeral," Marta said dreamily, "one of the best the family ever had. This room was simply filled with flowers—peonies, mums, lilies. I can remember every detail. I was wearing my black

sheath with the shawl of Spanish lace that you had bought for me when Grandfather passed away. And Teddy-bear was in the tails he'd just gotten for our wedding. He was so handsome in formal clothes. And you—what did you wear?"

Grandmother Prue smiled sweetly but proffered no reply.

"I think it was the very same dress you're wearing today. Yes, indeed it was. I can remember the silk glinting in the sunlight after the service."

Marta brushed her hand over the stiff brocade of her grandmother's dress and appraised once more the marvelous properties of the material. "So beautiful, and yet so sturdy. It was a very practical



choice, if I must say so myself."

With a little sigh for all the special nicenesses the family could not now afford, Marta returned to her knitting. Her busy fingers presented a startling contrast to Grandmother Prue's frail, wrinkled hands,

folded placidly in her lap; they were two nervous rodents spinning an exercise wheel while, in the same cage so to speak, a more perfectly domesticated pair slept dreamlessly. For several minutes the silence of the old house was broken only by the click of Marta's needles and the purr of the electric motor in the grandfather clock.

Then one could hear outside the house the distinctive rustle of compressed air on gravel and the rasp of the plastic landing cushions as the bulk of the Ground-Effect-Machine settled onto the driveway.

"Ah, that must be Teddy-bear, home from work," Marta announced to no one—or to Grandmother Prue. She went into the foyer and adjusted the tight bun of her hair before the mirror. She always liked to look her best. She frowned thoughtfully at the plump, rosy-cheeked face that confronted her there and decided that 140 really was the right weight for her. Returning to the sofa, she smoothed out the ruffled silk of Prue's dress.

Teddy entered from the back of the house, cast a look of distaste at Grandmother Prue, and sprawled out on Marta's end of the sofa.

"Do be more careful, my love," Marta scolded. "You almost toppled Grandmother." She felt Prue's ankle gingerly where he had scuffed it. "It's chipped! You chipped it!"

"What the hell, Marta! She's about ready for an urn anyhow. How about a drink? I'm bushed."

"For heaven's sake, Teddy-bear! How can you talk like that, right in front of her? Have some consideration."

"A martini."

"You drink too much. The shaker's on the liquor cabinet. Pour one for me, too."

While Teddy poured their drinks, Marta repossessed her cushion on the sofa. She squinted at her grandmother appraisingly. "Anyhow, Prue will stand up for another fifty years, with care. Basically, she's young. Her skin is still lovely. It's scarcely changed since the day of the funeral."

"It shouldn't—after the money we paid. Here's your drink. And where, my plump lovely, am I supposed to sit?"

Marta patted the middle cushion of the sofa. "Snuggle up between us."

"A cozy thought, but thank you, no. I'll be in the den when dinner is ready."

"Don't disturb Uncle Maurice!"

Teddy, already halfway up the stairs, didn't reply. Marta glanced at her grandmother with embarrassment. "Try and forgive him, Prue dear, as I do. I just don't know what puts my little Teddy-bear into these grizzly moods." Marta giggled at

her spontaneous play upon words.

But not Prue. Prue's carefully modeled smile didn't change at all. Her hands rested in her lap placidly as ever. Her glass eyes sparkled in the electric light, and her rosy flesh glowed like a spring flower—a triumph of the mortician's art. A lovely old woman.

Of all the members of the Phillips' family circle, Marta felt most at home with her grandmother, although every one of them—Uncle Maurice and Aunt Cecily, Tyrone, and Luke, her baby brothers, not to mention her parents—was nice, each in his own place.

When Teddy didn't answer Marta's second call to dinner an hour later, she made a brief apology to Aunt Cecily (who sat at the foot of the dinner table, her head cocked quizzically to one side—so like her!) and went up the stairs to fetch her husband from the den.

She paused at the oak door with mild surprise. Teddy was talking to Uncle Maurice. How nice, Marta thought, and how unusual. Teddy, unfortunately, didn't get on very well with his in-laws, especially Uncle Maurice, who had the most comfortable seat in the den, a leather rocking chair. The rocking chair *belonged* to Maurice, but Teddy just refused to understand.

It would have been a shame to interrupt them when they were

having a man-to-man talk, but Marta couldn't resist just a peep. She bent down to the keyhole. Uncle Maurice's rocker was directly in her line of vision. She gasped.

Teddy was sitting in her uncle's rocker, rocking it like an Exercycle and gesturing vigorously with the martini shaker as he talked. Uncle Maurice—Maurice, her father's brother, dead these twenty years—was lying on his back on the fringed



carpet, his crossed legs sticking awkwardly into the air.

"You look like hell, Maury," Teddy said with a wave of the shaker. "You've got to relax more, old boy, let down your hair. You've been cooped up in this family mausoleum too long, that's your trouble. You need fresh air, sunshine, a change of scenery. We could put you out in the garden. You could hold up a birdbath. Utilita-

rian. Dignified, too. How'd you like that?"

Marta threw open the door, sputtering with rage. "Beast! Madman! Birdbaths!"

"And a very becoming idea it is, my snoopy love. We'll put wings on your little brother Luke to make him a cupid. It'll be a French garden."

Marta was on the floor caressing her uncle, comforting him. Uncle Maurice smiled with the understanding of the very old. His smile spoke to Marta: "Don't pay attention to him, Marta. He's drunk. He's beneath contempt."

"I know that, Uncle darling," she replied in a voice broken by sobs. "He's not worth your little finger. But I can't help it—a birdbath!" She turned on her husband angrily. "Out of my uncle's rocker!"

Teddy tilted the shaker up to catch the last drops of the encouraging gin on his tongue. "Go tell it to your mother, Marta. This is *my* chair. As of now."

Marta grabbed her husband by his tie and gave it a violent jerk, not having noticed it was loose. Tie in hand, Marta toppled back into her uncle's lap. There was a brittle snap of bone and a pouf of black powder as her uncle's legs gave way under Marta's weight.

The next morning as soon as she

heard Teddy driving away from the house, Marta unlocked the bedroom door. Hungry as she was, her first thought was to look in on Uncle Maurice. He was not, as Marta had feared, still stretched on the floor. Teddy had replaced him in his rocker as best he could, but the marks of the disaster were only too evident; the clothes soiled by embalming powder, the concave limbs wrenched out of their sockets, the texture of his skin savagely marred. Hundreds of dollars worth of cosmetic art had been wantonly destroyed.

Marta hesitated a moment before phoning the family mortician. Her mother's funeral had been so recent, and it had been necessary then to take out a third mortgage on the house even after the insurance had been paid. There really was no room in the budget for the expensive repair work Uncle Maurice needed, but one had obligations to one's own family that couldn't be shirked.

Dr. LeJardin promised to be at the house by ten. He could always be counted on in an emergency.

Until the grief therapist arrived Marta took a light breakfast with Aunt Cecily, who looked (Marta thought) rather upset.

"Is it any wonder, my dear?"

The man whom Marta let in at the front door was not Dr. LeJardin, although he wore the traditional

black suit and white chrysanthemum of the mortician.

"Isn't the doctor well this morning?" Marta asked. The young mortician seemed to find her question surprising. Perhaps he hadn't understood. She repeated her question.

"Oh, quite well. Quite. Now, if you will just show me the body?"

Marta lowered her eyes. Such strange language from a man of his position! The body! Nevertheless, Dr. LeJardin would not have sent an incompetent to attend Uncle Maurice. Marta led the way to the den. The mortician hardly glanced at her uncle before he asked Marta to help him carry him down to the hearse.

"Is it as serious as that?" she asked.

Another queer look! Her uncle's case must be extreme. Marta disliked sending any of her loved ones out of the house, but one doesn't argue with the doctor. She grabbed her uncle's dangling legs, and the doctor gripped him about the torso. Together they lugged Uncle Maurice out to the hearse, leaving behind them an inky trail of powder.

When Uncle Maurice was comfortably laid out in the hearse, the mortician turned again to Marta. "Now, if I may see Mrs. Phillips?" "Grandmother Prue? Her ankle

was chipped yesterday, but I fixed that myself."

"I had better decide that, don't you think?"

"Of course, Doctor. I didn't mean to interfere." Marta led the mortician to the parlor and introduced him to Grandmother Prue.

The doorbell rang. "Will you two excuse me a moment?" Marta asked. "I'll just see who it is at the door. Probably a salesman."

It was, instead, Dr. LeJardin. "Doctor, how nice of you to come after all. Your assistant is looking after Grandmother right now."

"My assistant?"

"That's his hearse beside yours in the driveway."

"You must be mistaken. I sent no assistant. As you can see, I came myself." Dr. LeJardin examined the modest, almost invisible lettering on the door of the unfamiliar hearse. "Who called these people, Mrs. Smith?"

"I did, of course. I called you this morning."

"I have no connection, I can assure you, with Green Vistas Cemetery."

"Cemetery!" Marta's face became a mask of horror. That single word had conjured up livid nightmares of the medieval past, something out of the Twentieth Century. A loveless vision of graves and marble monuments, of parents and children, hus-

bands and wives, committed pitilessly to decay in an indifferent earth. Cemeteries! And in her own home!

"Where is this man now?" Dr. LeJardin asked.

"Heavens! I left him alone with Grandmother!"

Darting up the front steps, Marta practically collided with Grandmother Prue clasped in the ungentle arms of the false mortician. "Help me with this one, won't you?" he asked of Marta.

With a cry of rage and horror, Marta caught hold of her grandmother about the waist and wrestled her away from her abductor.

"Be careful, lady—this one is about ready to fall to pieces."

"Watch your language, young man," Dr. LeJardin said sternly, stepping forward to relieve Marta of her burden. "I cannot allow you to insult my professional competence, or to malign my client's relations."

"Sorry," the cemetery driver said, scowling. "I didn't know there would be so much trouble. Mr. Smith didn't say nothing about ghouls."

"Mr. Smith," Marta echoed as the stranger climbed into his hearse. "Teddy!" she whispered, as the hearse sailed down the driveway. It was a block away before Marta remembered her uncle.

"Uncle Maurice!" she called out to the vanishing hearse. "Bring back my uncle!"

A tight-lipped and menacing Marta sat beside an imperturbable, if somewhat untidy, Grandmother Prue when Teddy arrived home that evening. Though tonight there was no martini shaker awaiting him on the liquor cabinet, Teddy seemed to be in the best of spirits. "Good evening, love," he said to Marta cheerily.

There was no reply except the click of the knitting needles.

"Did the Green Vistas man get here this morning?"

Marta glared at her husband's suitcoat carelessly slung over Prue's frail hands—and said nothing.

"I've been thinking," Teddy went on, oblivious of both Marta and Prue's disapproval, "maybe the Egyptians weren't the most civilized people in history. The Greeks buried their dead, and there's something to be said for the Greeks. Remember that play that was banned in Los Angeles last year after the trouble with the Morticians' Association? It was called *Antigone*. Well, they *buried* people in those days."

("If he wants to drive me crazy with his foul language," Marta mumbled into her busy hands, "he's doing very well.")

"What I mean is—veneration can

be carried too far. Even in the United States, even here in California, it wasn't always this way. Just drive out into the country, and you'll find cemeteries, lots of them."

("Indian graveyards," Marta remembered the voices of her Sunday school teacher intoning, "still deface the countryside.")

"Christian cemeteries—and some of them are still in use—because there are many people who *believe* in burial. Uncle Maurice never wanted to be stuffed. He'd be happier if he knew he was going to Green Vistas. There are limits, of course. It's different with your own parents. Someday maybe I'll get my older brother to lend me . . ."

"It's different for *you*, isn't it? You wouldn't want *your* parents buried, would you? Well, what about mine?"

"It's not your parents I'm talking about, Marta. They look very nice in the bedroom. It's Uncle Maurice in the den, and Prue down here, and Cecily in the dining room, and little Luke in the nursery. There's more corpses in this house than people. Some of them have got to go to Green Vistas."

Marta stood up. "Over my dead body they will!"

They stared at each other until Marta's eyes gave way. She laughed hollowly. "You thought you'd pull one over on me, didn't you? I had

to spend the whole afternoon getting Uncle Maurice released from that dreadful place. You know what they were going to do? They were going to cremate him! That's what *you'd* told them to do! Uncle Maurice—cremated!"

"You mean to say he's back here again!"

"He's upstairs in the den, sitting in *his* rocker."

"Not for long, love. Not for long."

Clenching her knitting into a tight ball of yarn, Marta watched Teddy go up the stairs. He stopped in front of the den door.

"Bring me the keys, Marta," he called down angrily.

Marta looked beseechingly into Grandmother Prue's glass eyes. There was a depth of forgiveness and compassion in them as well as a stern, commanding quality.

"I'll be right there, Teddy."

She picked at the loops of yarn about the needle. "Right there."

Marta removed the sweater from its stretching frame and smoothed it out for Grandmother Prue's ap-

proval. Its gold and heather stripes glowed in the morning sunlight.

"It fits perfectly. I only had to take in the neck a little. I think Teddy has gotten thinner this last week. Dr. LeJardin says it's only natural, considering. Nothing to worry about. He's helped out in so many little ways, even advised me of a new mortgage company. Finances can be so complicated. Teddy and I were talking about it just this morning."

Grandmother Prue seemed surprised.

"Oh, didn't I tell you?" Marta asked coquettishly. "Teddy is up in the den now. He's left his job. He and Uncle Maurice are together—Maurice is in his lovely old leather rocker, and Teddy is sitting in *his* armchair. Isn't that nice?"

Marta giggled with girlish delight. It *was* so nice.

Prue smiled. Her folded hands, translucent in the warm glow of the morning sun, seemed to possess a life of their own.

All about the sitting room, bouquets of fresh flowers filled the air with their peculiar fragrance.

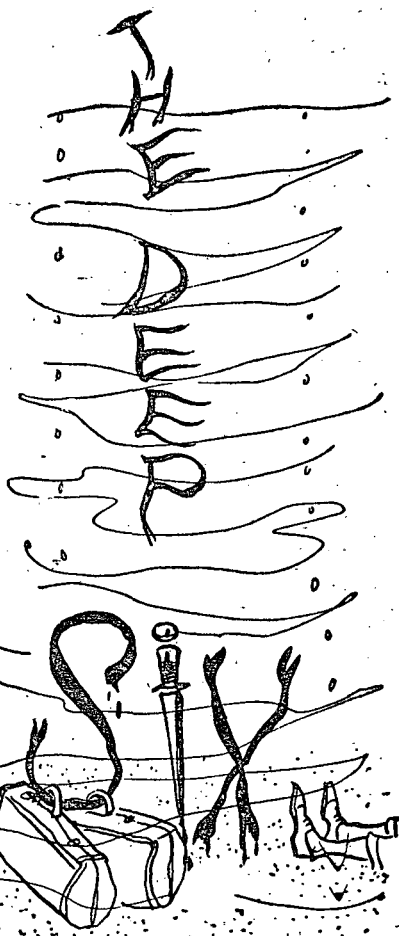


When an initial act marks only the incipience of a flood of dispossessions, it could be sufficient for dampening one's spirit.

MARTY POLLARD propped his fishing rod against the seat of the skiff and put on the yellow rain jacket. In the gray light of early morning the calm surface of the lake was pocked by raindrops.

Phil Devlin, hunched on the rear seat beside the small outboard motor, said, "Thought the fish would have started hitting by now, Marty."

"Patience, pal, we just got started." He lit a cigarette, pulled the hood of the jacket up against the fine, mist-like rain, and picked up the rod again. Devlin had been right. Getting away from the store for a few days did help. On the lake, with a fishing rod in his hands, the problems did indeed seem smaller. They didn't go away, there



were going to be no miracles wrought, but there was something about the outdoors that threw a different light on things. It was also doing his nerves no harm getting away from Francine for a while. That part Phil wouldn't know about, having never leaped into the sea of matrimony himself.

Marty gave the deep trolling plug a jerk, hoping the action might enliven the appetite of a passing bass. The little outboard chugged along faithfully, moving the boat on a course parallel to the steep shore, some thirty feet out. A couple of hundred yards down the road that ran along the lakeshore he saw a car. It was coming very fast, and for a moment it disappeared from his view.

His mind was on other things, the big shopping center that had put such a crimp in his small hardware business, and what he could do to straighten that out if only he could arrange the proper financing.

The car abruptly appeared again, making the sharp curve just above them. It was going even faster than he had first thought, and now Marty could see that it was sliding on the rain-slick road. There was no sound of skidding, or if there was, it was inaudible above the steady chug of the outboard. But he saw the back end slew around on the narrow road, and the desperate cut of the wheels as the driver tried to bring the car back under control.

"Phill!" Marty pointed up, and Devlin craned his head around and saw the car. It was completely off the road now, soaring gracefully through the air and dropping so rapidly that Devlin rammed the throttle forward in an effort to avoid having the car come down on them. The abrupt action served only to choke the engine and it spluttered to a halt. With the outboard suddenly silenced, they could distinctly hear screams from the car.

It passed directly over the boat



and crashed into the lake in the attitude of a shallow dive. A steep wave struck the skiff almost at once, rocking it violently. The car itself submerged completely, then bobbed up, the hood still underwater and the windows almost at water level. It had swung sideways to the boat and a man's face appeared at the rear window, staring out at them, his fingers curled over the top of the glass which was open several inches.

"Get the motor started!" Marty said. He snatched up the paddle and began to stroke toward the car as Phil jerked on the starter cord. The car was settling rapidly, air hissing out the windows and vents as the weight of the steel pulled it down.

"Help," the man called out faintly. "Help . . ."

There were four other men in the car. Marty saw the driver sprawled forward on the steering column, the others crumpled forward by the impact, all but the one either unconscious or dead. As they drew alongside the car he also saw two large bags in the rear seat.

Marty grabbed the rear door handle, but either the door was locked or the pressure of the water prevented his opening it. His face was only inches from that of the dazed passenger, and for an instant their fingers brushed. Then the car tipped violently, rear bumper

skyward, nose down, and with much bubbling and gurgling and a final scream from the man, it plunged beneath the water. A circular wave swept in, met, tossed a little plume of water into the air, and then there was only the sound of the rain drizzling down softly on the surface of the lake.

Marty and Phil stared at each other. "Good gosh . . ." Devlin muttered.

Marty leaned and peered over the side, as if expecting the car's occupants to start popping up. But nothing at all came up, other than a few final bubbles and a faint slick of oil that spread away over the water leaving no more trace than a flooded outboard motor would have.

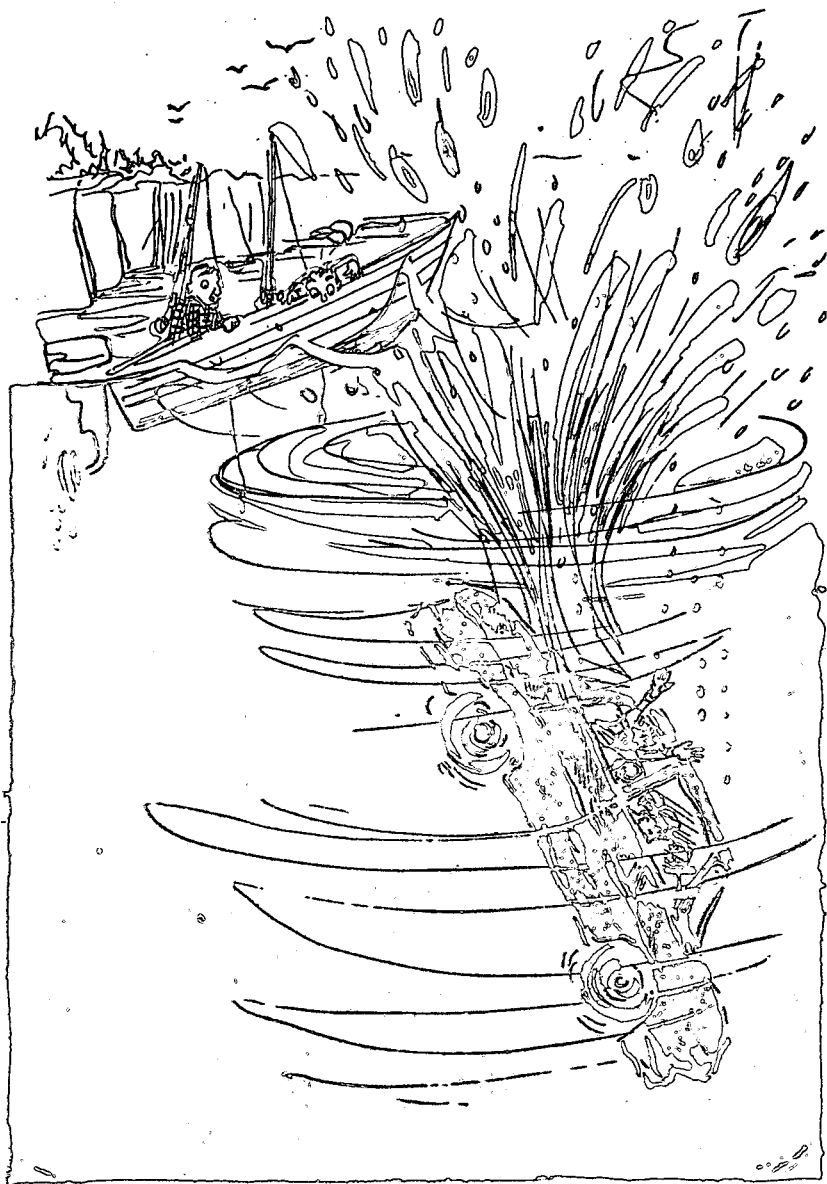
"Hadn't we better do something?" Marty said.

"Do? The water's seventy or eighty feet deep here! What the devil can we do?" He shook his head, as if clearing it. "I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes. I'm not so sure I believe it anyhow."

"That poor guy at the window. . . ."

"The damn car nearly landed on us, Marty."

They both glanced up quickly at the road, as if expecting another. But cars rarely used the old road now that the new interstate highway had been completed. The lake



road, following the shoreline for twelve or fifteen miles, was used mostly now by fishermen and people like Phil who had cabins on this side of the big lake.

"We'd better mark the place and go for help," Marty said.

"Best way is to run back to the cabin and drive the car into Flintville. It's not likely another car'll be along any time soon."

"Do you suppose we should stay here for a while? Just in . . . in case?"

"None of 'em will be getting out down there, but it won't hurt to wait a few minutes."

They waited ten minutes, and then Devlin got the little motor cranked up and the two friends headed back for the cabin.

More than an hour had passed by the time they got to Flintville, what with the long, slow boat ride and then the rain-slickened dirt road leading from Devlin's cabin to the highway. They drove directly to the police station, which was located on the courthouse square. Early as it was, just seven o'clock, the square was a beehive of activity. Cars roared in and out and a great many men milled about the police station.

"I wonder what's up?" Marty said as they went inside the building. A big man in a black suit and a ten gallon hat brushed by them

and Marty tapped him on the shoulder. "Say, mister, where do we report a . . ."

The big fellow shrugged him off. "Somebody clear all these people outta here!" he bellowed. "How are we supposed to get anything done with a bunch of rubbernecks cluttering up the place?"

"But we just want to . . ." Devlin started.

"Right over there, buster, the sergeant'll take care of you."

A door to the left flew open and a thin, unshaven face peered out. "Hey, Cap'n Cleary! FBI in Atlanta wants to talk to you!"

"Tell 'em to get up here!"

"They've got some men on the way, but they still want to talk to you."

The big man groaned. "Okay. Be right there." He grabbed a uniformed officer who was passing. "What about those road blocks east of town? Did you get the state patrol on that?"

"Yessir. All taken care of."

"What's all the fuss?" Marty asked blandly.

"Somebody please see what these birds want!" the captain shouted. A cop took them in tow and led them to a desk.

"I'm Sergeant Holman," he said. "Now then, what's your beef?"

A brash young man smelling of shaving lotion forced his way be-

tween them. "Come on, Holman, give out! I can't get beans from Cleary. How much did they get away with? Who was it saw them? What are you doing. . . ?"

"You know as much as I do, Fred. Old Cleve Towers just happened to see 'em sneaking out the back door of the bank about five-thirty. If he hadn't seen 'em, we probably wouldn't have found out about it till the bank opened. The vault's been busted into, with maybe \$200,000 of the bank's money gone. On top o' that, a bunch of safe deposit boxes were rifled, and there's no telling how much they got there. We won't know the total haul till we catch 'em."

"If you catch 'em," the reporter grinned.

"We'll catch 'em. Got road blocks on every road in the area." The sergeant tried to turn back to Marty and Phil, but the reporter grabbed his arm.

"What kind of car, Holman? And how many men?"

"Five men and a black car, medium-sized."

Marty and Phil glanced at each other, and Marty turned quickly back to the cop. "Hey, we saw . . ."

Devlin gave him a sharp kick in the shin and interrupted. "We see you're busy right now, Sergeant. We'll check back later."

"You got a complaint to make?"
"Nothing serious. Just some . . . some stuff swiped out of our car. It'll wait. It's insured, anyhow."

"What kind of stuff?"

"Camera," Devlin said. At the same instant Marty realized what his friend was doing and volunteered, "Fishing box!"

The cop looked at them with a scowl. "Make up your mind, what was it?"

"Camera *and* fishing box!" Devlin said, almost shouting. He grinned uneasily and backed away from the desk, pulling Marty with him. The reporter resumed his attack on the sergeant and the two fishermen scurried through the crowd and out to the street.

"I think we did the wrong thing," Marty said as they sat across from each other at a table in a diner half a block from the square. "I think we should have told him what happened."

"You heard what they were saying, Marty! Those guys in that car just blew the bank. They got more than \$200,000 and it's all down there on the bottom of the lake!"

"Sure—if it's the same car."

"Don't give me that *if* business," Devlin scoffed. "A black car, five guys in it, and you saw those big bags in the back seat."

"The cops will be looking everywhere for them, and you heard

what that fellow said about the FBI coming up here. I think we ought to go back and tell them, Phil. I don't want to fool around with the FBI."

Devlin stirred his coffee, then pushed the cup aside, folded his arms on the table and leaned toward Marty. "We aren't fooling around with anybody, pal, can't you see that? We're just—just waiting to see what happens."

"We're withholding information, that's what we're doing. And it's against the law."

"So, suddenly you know all about the law or something? What are you, Marty, some kind of lawyer maybe?"

"No, but ignorance of the law is no excuse . . ."

"Oh, brother! Let's get back out to the cabin and hash this whole thing over. It won't hurt to wait a couple of days. It's not as if telling about the car now would help those guys down there in it. Anyhow, maybe the cops'll find it by themselves."

Marty finished his coffee and shrugged. "Okay, we'll wait a couple of days and see what happens."

On the way back to Devlin's cabin they stopped at the curve where the bandits' car had plunged into the lake. There was hardly a mark on the wet pavement or on

the narrow gravel shoulder to show that anything had happened; nevertheless, Devlin carefully smoothed the gravel with his shoe and by the time they drove on no one could have detected anything out of the ordinary.

At the cabin they turned on a portable radio, popped a pair of beers, and settled down to hear the developments. The Flintville radio station had a man on the scene at the bank giving a blow by blow account of the investigation, or as near that as he could, since confusion seemed to be the principal ingredient at that point.

"Captain Cleary has just told your reporter that the search is being concentrated in the hill country surrounding the lake. It is thought the bandits may have holed up nearby, as hastily set up road blocks have produced no trace of the fleeing criminals."

"It's them, all right!" Devlin exulted. "Holed up in the area, are they? He can say that again! But the hole is about eighty feet deep and filled with water!"

Marty was still plagued by doubts concerning the course they had embarked upon, but when he mentioned again to Devlin that he thought they were doing the wrong thing, Phil replied, "How's that business of yours going, pal? Making lots of money since the shopping

center opened down the street?"

"You know my business is lousy. And so is yours."

"Right. So let's analyze it. A guy with a nice little hardware store . . ." he reached over and tapped Marty on the chest, ". . . and a guy with a comfortable little liquor store . . ." he tapped his own chest, ". . . are doing okay until a big shopping center opens up right down the street. They got no parking problems like we got, and two liquor stores and a big hardware emporium open up in the shopping center. Our business hits the skids. We need dough to make changes or to move, but we don't have it and the banks are suddenly very cool toward us." He aimed a finger out at the lake. "But we know where there's a lot of dough, and we're the only two guys on earth who *do* know where it is! That dough can solve every last problem you and I have got, Marty! And you want to tell it to the cops?"

Marty let it all sink in, and then he said, "It'd take a lot of equipment to pull that car up. You said yourself the water there is eighty feet deep. How can you do something like that without attracting a lot of attention?"

"What do we want with the car? And we sure don't want the five guys inside. This is a job for divers, Marty. Have you ever seen that

guy Mike Nelson on TV? He uses one of those diving outfits with the tanks and all, and he does stuff like that in his sleep."

"Sure," Marty grinned. "But we aren't Mike Nelson. Why, I've never even seen a diving outfit, and I'll bet you haven't either."

"Right," Devlin said, "but we're going to see one, first thing when we get back to the city."

A ray of morning sunlight slanted in through the window. "Rain's stopped," Marty said absently.

"Kind of like an omen, maybe?" Devlin suggested. He stood up and finished the can of beer. "Let's get back out fishing. We don't want to do anything the least suspicious. We want to go on just like we didn't know a thing. Right, *partner*?"

The place had the casually disorganized air of all establishments that deal with the sporting public. There was a conglomeration of equipment and gadgets on display in showcases, none of which seemed to have any logic or attention to eye appeal. They were simply there, to be looked at if anyone cared to do so.

At the rear of the store against one wall stood a row of tall pressure cylinders, and beyond them was an air compressor. A cluster of boys stood about a young man who was filling a smaller air cylinder, all talking excitedly and occasionally

laughing in happy anticipation.

Marty and Phil waited patiently at the counter and thumbed through a catalog until the young man was free to wait on them.

"We're thinking about taking up diving," Phil said. "Your sign out front says you give instructions."

"We got a new class starting Monday downtown at the YMCA pool," he said. He looked them over, his gaze pausing momentarily on Marty's ample paunch. "A man has to be in pretty good physical condition to become a scuba diver."

Marty grinned and patted his stomach. "This? Don't worry about it!"

"I ain't worried about it, mister. Maybe you should."

"What do we need for the course?" Phil asked.

"Well, we supply equipment or you can bring your own."

After a bit of dickering Marty and Phil signed up for lessons and bought a complete set of scuba diving equipment, used, at a cost of slightly more than \$200 for each of them.

"It's okay for you," Marty said as they drove away, "but what about me? You don't know what it's like having a wife who watches every dime that comes in or goes out. Francine is going to find out I spent two hundred bucks and she's going to want to know where the devil it went."

"This thing is between you and me, Marty. The worst thing we could do is to go blabbing it around."

"Okay, but I'll still have to tell Francine something."

"Say, the guy that does my book-keeping used to be with the city tax department. I'll bet I could get some kind of blank tax form, make it out to you, mark it paid in full, and that would be that!"

Marty thought about it for a minute or two. "Well, I guess it's as good as anything else." He shook his head. It wasn't as simple as it looked. Just eighty feet or so away from all that money, and now there was all this business about diving lessons, and lying to Francine, and phony tax bills. That was going to be the tough part, trying to convince Francine.

The next morning Marty Pollard discovered it was far tougher than he imagined. Petite Francine, less than a hundred pounds soaking wet, seemed to swell up at times like this, and Marty sat hunched over his oatmeal, listening.

"Bowling, was it? Where do you and Phil do your bowling now, Marty, downtown at the YMCA pool? And what about *this*?" She flung the fake tax receipt across the breakfast table where it came to rest in the bowl of hot cereal. "I called the tax office and they don't know one thing about this!"

And finally, there's two hundred dollars missing from the bank account, and what about all that junk you've got hidden in the back room at the store! *Diving* equipment, Marty Pollard! Have you gone completely out of your mind? We can hardly scrape together enough for the mortgage payments, business is so lousy, and here you've taken up a new hobby!"

He lifted the paper out of his oatmeal, shook it off lightly, and dropped it on the table. "If you'll let me explain, Francine," he muttered, not having the slightest idea where to go from there.

"I'm waiting, Marty," she said, crossing her arms tightly across her bosom. "I'm not unreasonable. When you came back from that hardware convention in Atlantic City and I found those lipstick smears on your shirt and that woman's name and phone number in your coat pocket, I was reasonable, wasn't I? I let you explain. . . ."

"But you didn't believe me."

"That's beside the point. Go on. I'm waiting."

Phil Devlin could not possibly understand. There was no way a single man could understand these things. "Well, it's this way, Francine," he said, defeated. "When Phil and I were at the lake fishing we stumbled onto something big."

"Blonde or brunette?" she rasped between clenched teeth.

He tried to ignore the remark. "You've read in the papers about that big bank robbery in Flintville?"

Her expression did not change at once, but the blood seemed to drain slowly from her face. "Marty, you and Phil didn't . . . you're not the ones the police are looking for . . ."

He had not anticipated this. "No! Of course not! Rob the bank? Phil and *me*?"

"Then what is it you're getting at? And it better be good!"

He took a deep breath, pushed the oatmeal aside and, starting at the very beginning, told Francine everything.

By the time he was done she was staring at him with her mouth agape. Behind the unusual expression, he thought he saw, though he could not be sure, a faint glimmer of respect.

"And that's it," he said. "Phil and I are learning to dive so we can go down and get the money. It was Phil's idea. I wanted to tell the police what we'd seen and . . ."

"Tell the *police*!" she broke in. "The biggest thing that ever came along and you wanted to tell the cops! Are you out of your mind?"

Funny, Marty thought, but that was almost precisely Phil Devlin's reaction.

Francine scurried out to the back porch and came back with an armful of recent newspapers. She cleared away the table and, starting with the first one, clipped the news stories of the robbery. "Look at this one," she said gleefully. "Vanishing Bandits Baffle Cops."

"They say the FBI never does stop looking for people like that," Marty ventured. "They never close a file until it's solved."

She did not appear to have heard him. "Did you see this, Marty? Last Wednesday's paper says that the Flintville police are examining the lake road for signs of an accident. They think the bandits might have run into the lake."

"I saw that. Friday's paper says they didn't find anything. Did you hear what I said about the FBI? They never give up."

"But you and Phil didn't rob the bank, honey. What's against the law if you just happen to find a whole lot of money lying on the bottom of the lake?" She went on reading the papers. "Are you going to get it soon?"

"The lake's deep where the car went in. Phil says it's at least eighty feet, and our instructor says we shouldn't try any deep dives till we finish the training course. We're going to the lake tomorrow and measure just how deep it really is."

"I'm going with you."

"No! You can't! I mean, Phil and I agreed we wouldn't say a word about this to anybody. He'll get sore if he finds out I told you."

"Well, let Mr. Phil Devlin get sore!" she bristled. "He ought to know that a husband doesn't have any secrets from his wife."

"Try to understand, Francine!"

"Maybe you should try to understand, Marty. Has it occurred to you that your old friend might want



to keep this little secret between the two of you because he has plans?"

"Plans? What are you talking about?"

"It seems simple to me. I'm talking about an awful lot of money, and I'm talking about Phil Devlin, who has always looked shifty to me."

"Phil? Shifty? He's my best

friend! What's shifty about my best friend?"

"You take a close look at him sometime. It's kind of hard to pin down, but I think it's his eyes."

"That is the most absurd thing I ever heard," he said flatly. He had to admit that it was odd, though, Francine's bringing this up. He had felt a peculiar, indefinable mistrust growing between himself and Phil, and he now realized that it traced back to that moment in the Flintville police station when Phil had kicked him in the shin.

At eight o'clock the following morning Francine and Marty pulled up in front of Phil Devlin's house and Marty reluctantly blew the horn. Phil came trotting out, paused at the side of the car, looked from Francine to Marty, and then climbed into the back seat, slamming the door far harder than necessary.

"She knows?" he asked.

Francine turned and gave him an icy stare. "She knows."

"We agreed, Marty," he said, trying to bypass Francine. "It was going to be just between the two of us until we found it."

"I—I couldn't help it, Phil."

"Why so secretive?" Francine asked. "You wouldn't have been cooking up a little double-cross, would you?"

"Francine!" Marty said. "You've

got no reason to talk to Phil like that!"

"No? Look at him, Marty. I hit the nail right on the head."

"That's what I meant," Phil went on, trying to contain his anger. "You tell Francine what we're up to and right away she starts looking for trouble."

"Trouble!" she screamed.

"Oh, shut up, both of you," Marty said. "It's done, now let's make the best of it." He glanced furtively in the rearview mirror at Devlin. He did seem unaccountably peeved by Francine's being there. Maybe, just maybe, she was onto something after all.

There was no other boat in sight and no cars up on the road. As they came abreast of the boulder on the shore by which they had marked the spot, Devlin cut the motor.

"This look about right, Marty?"

"I think so." He tipped the rod over the gunwale and took his thumb off the reel. The line spun out until the sinker struck bottom, and Marty made a little knot in the line and reeled back in. "That's got it. We can measure it when we get back to the cabin. Let's go."

A car was parked beside Marty's when they got back to the cabin. As Phil eased the skiff ashore a big man in a black suit and a ten gallon hat came ambling down the slope, and before he was halfway to them

Marty was able to recognize him. "One of you fellas Phil Devlin?" the big man said in a voice that rang with authority.

Phil nodded and climbed out into the shallow water. "That's me."

The big man stopped at the bow of the boat, squinted slightly and let his gaze pause on each of them, as if taking a mental photograph. Then he pulled a leather folder from his pocket and flashed it around.

"Captain Cleary of the Flintville police."

"Police?" Devlin said faintly.

The badge and ID card disappeared into the pocket, and the captain pinned Devlin with his gaze. "The guy up the road at the bait shop knows you. Says he thinks you bought some shiners from him on the 5th of this month."

Devlin laughed uneasily. "No law against buying shiners, is there?"

Cleary overlooked the obvious. "You folks have read about the bank robbery we had in Flintville on the 6th?"

"What's that got to do with me—with us?"

"It's a tough case. Wondered if maybe you were out fishing early on the morning of the 6th."

"The 6th, huh?" Phil pursed his lips. "You were up here with me then, weren't you, Marty? Sure! I remember it was raining that morning. We didn't have much

luck. Should have stayed in."

"Did you happen to see anything?" Cleary asked. "Maybe a car or a boat with five guys in it?"

"No—fact is, we didn't even see a fish."

"That's the truth, Phil," Marty put in. "Just about the worst luck we ever had. I . . ."

A uniformed cop appeared from beyond the cabin and started down toward the group at the boat. "Any luck?" he called down to the captain.

"Don't look like it, Holman."

The cop looked at Devlin and frowned. He stopped at the captain's side, his attention switched to Marty, and the frown deepened. "Say, don't I know you guys from some place?"

"Us?" Marty croaked, his throat suddenly bone dry.

The cop rubbed his jaw to summon the genie of remembrance. "Yeah, you guys were in the station the morning of the bank job. Something about your car being busted into."

"Oh, that," Devlin said. "Forgot all about it. Fact is, we *thought* some things had been swiped out of the car, but we found the stuff back here at the cabin, didn't we, Marty?"

"We sure did. Found 'em. Sure did find 'em." His lips tried to stick when they came together.

The captain nodded to Marty. "The two of you fishing together that morning, huh? What's your name, mister?"

"Me? Oh, I'm Marty. Party Mollard—I mean Marty Pollard." He swung his arm around stiffly, striking Francine in the neck. "This is my wife, Mrs. Mollard—Pollard."

Both officers touched their caps cursorily, then the captain sighed and pushed his hat back. He took a card from his pocket and gave it to Devlin. "Well, if you do remember anything about that morning, no matter how little it might seem to you, we'd appreciate your getting in touch."

They all walked up to the cabin and cars. Sgt. Holman, climbing in behind the wheel, glanced into Marty's car. "Let's go, Holman," Cleary grumbled. "We've got a lot to do."

Three pairs of eyes watched the car until it disappeared in the direction of the highway. It was Marty who broke the silence.

"Do you think they got suspicious, Phil?"

"What's to get suspicious of? They're desperate, that's all. Grabbing at straws. They got less chance of solving this case than I got of flying to the moon. Now come on, let's measure that line."

The five bank robbers, along with their car and their loot, were not in

eighty feet of water at all, but in one hundred and twenty feet. Marty and Phil queried their instructor at the end of the next diving class on a hypothetical dive of that depth.

"Pretty deep for beginners," he said. "I wouldn't worry about you, Mr. Devlin. You've got a natural knack for diving." He cut a glance at Marty. "It's going to take a little longer with you, Mr. Pollard. It's like that with some people. Some got it, some ain't."

Driving home that night Devlin said, "You could stay in the boat, Marty. I could dive down and get it by myself."

The things that Francine had been saying about Phil Devlin had sunk in deeper and more effectively than even Marty himself realized. "And stash half of it away so you can go back later?" he asked harshly. "Not on your life, Phill! And don't try anything like going up there without me, either! I'll be keeping a close eye on you!"

"Now *wait* a minute! You think I'd try to double-cross you? That I'm some kind of fink or something?"

"I just want to be sure we understand each other, buddy. No funny stuff."

"*Funny* stuff, is it?"

"Any funny stuff and I go straight to the cops."

Devlin slammed on the brakes, reached over and grabbed Marty's shirt front. "Don't start threatening me, pal! I could handle you when we were kids and I can still do it!"

"Get your crummy hands off me!" He clawed at Devlin's grip and the shirt tore down the front from neck to belt.

The abrupt sound seemed momentarily to bring both men to their senses. Devlin laughed self-consciously and put his hands back on the wheel.

"Sorry, Marty. I guess I kind of blew my stack there."

"I shouldn't have said what I did. Sorry, Phil."

But the rift was there and a smile and an apology were not going to close it. The weeks went by slowly, and the end of the diving course drew near. Marty told Francine what the instructor had said about Phil having a knack for diving, and subsequent sessions bore this out. Phil emerged decidedly as the star pupil of the entire class.

Francine's suspicions were endless and, to Marty, more and more convincing.

"What's to keep Phil from going up there and taking the money and hiding it somewhere?" she asked one night.

They had agreed that the salvage job had to be done at night, with the aid of a powerful underwater

light they had selected carefully.

"I told him what I'd do if he pulled any funny business. I'll call the cops," Marty said.

"And what can the cops do? All Phil has to do is say he doesn't know what you're talking about. And then who will be out on the limb?"

"He wouldn't try it alone. It's deep. It's . . ." He paced up and down the room, hands clasped behind his back. Sure it was deep, and there would be a certain element of danger, particularly for a lone diver. But the estimates of the haul the bandits had made had ranged up as high as half a million. Phil would be willing to take a chance for that kind of money. He might not want to settle for a half share. . . .

Marty snatched up the telephone and dialed Devlin's number. "We'll see if he's up to anything." The phone rang half a dozen times and Marty shifted it uneasily to the other ear. "Might be asleep," he said to Francine.

Her only reply was a sneer. He let the phone ring a few more times and then he slammed it down.

"He'd better not be trying to put anything over on me!" he snapped, grabbing up his hat.

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going over to Phil's house! If he's not there, I'm going up to the lake!"

He stormed out the door, Francine's "Be careful!" ringing in his ears. It was a moonless night, calm and warm. An ideal night for a solo dive.

He reached the car, and as he took hold of the handle there was a rustling sound from the nearby shrubbery. Marty paused, staring into the darkness. Leaves rustled again, and a shadow loomed up. Marty tensed himself.

"Kind of late to be going somewhere, isn't it, pal?" Phil Devlin materialized out of the gloom. "You wouldn't be trying to beat *me* to the loot, would you? All that talk of yours got me to thinking."

"What are you doing here? I just called your place. Got no answer and I figured *you* were . . ."

"Who're you talking to out there, Marty?" Francine called from the house. "What's going on?"

"It's Phil."

"*Phil!* What's he doing here?"

"He says he thought I was trying to double-cross him."

By unanimous agreement among the three of them, Phil Devlin moved into the Pollards' guest room that same night. They drove to Phil's, he packed a suitcase, and they drove back and settled him in his room, Francine turning back the covers for him.

"We should plan on making the dive in a week or ten days, Marty,"

Phil said. "Until then, we can all keep an eye on each other."

"I feel kind of silly about this whole business," Marty said.

"Better silly than sorry," remarked Francine.

"Right," seconded Devlin, and he bade them goodnight and closed and locked his door.

They sat down together at the breakfast table next morning, eyes swollen and red from sleeplessness.

"Sleep well?" Francine asked their guest.

"Like a top!"

"So did we!" She put his plate of eggs and bacon before him, then got Marty's and her own. "Eat hearty!" she smiled.

"Looks great!" Phil said. "A poor bachelor just doesn't eat like this!" With that, he swapped plates with Marty and dug in with gusto.

It saddened Marty. The complexities piled up. In addition to worrying about the police and the FBI, it now appeared that the friendship between himself and Phil Devlin, which dated back to early childhood, was shattered beyond repair. When trust goes out one window, he said to himself, friendship goes out the other. And as if to compound the fracture, a couple of nights later Francine took Marty aside urgently and revealed a discovery she had made while searching Phil's car.

"He's got a *knife*, Marty! Hidden under the car seat, one like I've seen pictures of in your diving books! What's he need a knife for? There aren't any sharks or octopuses in the lake!"

"Are you sure?"

"Am I sure! Do I look like I don't know a monkey wrench from a knife? Sure I'm sure!"

Phil was sitting on the small patio at the rear of the house, reading the evening paper and looking oddly at peace with the world. "The instructor says a knife is a handy tool to have," Marty said lamely.

"Maybe so, but who needs a knife when all you're going to do is go down one time and open a car door?"

Phil turned the page of the paper and re-crossed his legs. The last session of the diving course was set for the next day, a field trip to the lake to give the students a chance at depths greater than the thirteen feet afforded by the pool at the Y. It was the windup, the finale.

And Phil had bought himself a knife . . .

"Say something to him about it, Marty," Francine whispered close to his ear.

He stroked his chin thoughtfully. "I don't think I will."

"You're crazy if you don't!"

He looked around at her, his lips drawn tightly over his teeth in a

sinister grin. "I'm not going to say one thing to him, Francine. But tomorrow I'm going to buy *myself* a knife!"

The big night rolled around. Marty, Phil, and Francine put all the diving gear into the car and after a light supper drove up to the cabin. The night was fine for the task at hand, filled with stars and the sounds of crickets and an occasional bullfrog down by the lake.

But the mood of the group did not fit the night. There was the silent crackle of tension as the equipment was carried down to the skiff. A fishing rod was added so that if anyone chanced by while Francine was alone in the boat there would be little cause for suspicion. The underwater light was checked, and as they climbed into the boat and set out, Marty strapped on his new knife and sheath.

Devlin, at the outboard motor controls, peered at him in the gloom. "When did you get that?"

"The knife? Oh, I don't remember exactly. Just thought it might come in handy. You got one?"

"As a matter of fact, I have," he replied. He glared in the darkness at his two companions, then flipping his cigarette out into the water, touched the handle of his own diving knife.

The site of the crash was not

easy to locate even though they had made practice night runs from the cabin on several occasions. At last, however, their flashlight beam picked up the round boulder below the road by which they had marked the spot, and Devlin cut the motor.

Instantly, they were aware of the sound of another motor not far astern of them. Across the still water a small light flared in the night. The motor slowed and a voice wafted to them, "Havin' any luck?"

"Just some guys fishing," Marty whispered. He cupped his hands to his mouth. "Nope. Don't look too good here."

"Well, we'll give it a try around the bend," the man called back. The motor picked up speed and droned on past them, and Devlin eased the anchor over the side and let the long line run out.

"Hope there won't be any more boats hanging around," he said, and looking around at Marty, "You all set?"

Marty picked up his scuba gear and strapped the harness on, flipping the mouthpiece over his head. "I'm ready whenever you are."

"We got to find it quick, you know. At that depth we can only stay down a few minutes without having to figure decompression coming up. And we don't want to hang around here a minute longer than we have to after we get the dough."

"We've been over this a dozen times," Marty said. This was it. Really it. They were actually going down to get the money, and he wondered just what was going through Devlin's mind at that moment.

The sound of the other boat had died away beyond a bend in the shoreline, and Marty and Phil eased into the water and started down with the anchor line as a guide. The powerful light, carried by Devlin, stabbed into the blackness below. At last they reached the bottom, soft ooze with a little cloud stirred up where the anchor had touched down. Visibility was better than Marty had expected, and by the greatest stroke of luck Phil turned the light to their left and there, less than fifteen feet away, was the automobile.

The two divers finned quickly to it. The car sat upright, as if it had simply been parked there and was waiting to be driven away again. They made for the doors, Marty at the rear and Phil the front. Marty's door came open with surprising ease, and as it did, creating a small current of its own, a man's body emerged, head first, and began to drift away. A second body was half out as Marty caught at the first. The light dropped to the lake bottom, Devlin grappling to keep the second body inside the car.

In the sudden blackness, with the light directed away from him, Marty caught hold of a cold hand, and fighting down his revulsion, towed the deceased bandit back and pushed him into the back seat, where Devlin was in the process of reseating the one he had caught.

The light caught them in its beam as they crowded into the car with the five bodies and two large sacks. A glint of metal caught the periphery of Marty's vision—he was certain of it! Devlin had his knife in his hand! In an instant of sheer terror he reached for his own knife, banging his head against the roof of the car. He saw Devlin twist around, and they both tried to get through the open door at once.

But he had the knife in his hand now, and Marty brought it around as hard as the resistance of the water would allow. It seemed to sort of slide in just between Phil's ribs, and a dark billow suddenly joined the stirred clouds of silt.

Marty turned loose the knife and, outside the car, closed the door. He retrieved the light and aimed it through the window. It was very difficult to see clearly but he did not need to count them to know that there were six bodies in the car now.

It had been Phil's fault! He had pulled his knife first . . . or had he? Had it been something else

that glinted in the beam of light?

It was too late to worry about that. He had to get the bags out and he had to get back to the surface so that decompression stages wouldn't be needed going up.

He removed the bags, closed the door again, and finned back to the anchor line, tied the bags on and started slowly upward.

His head broke the surface beside the boat and he dropped the mouthpiece, pushed the mask up, and put the light over into the boat.

"Marty?" came Francine's whisper. "Is—is that you, Marty?"

"It's me." He gripped the side of the skiff, breathing heavily.

"You found the car?"

There was a splash toward the shore, a fish feeding in the watery jungle. "Yeah, we found the car."

"And—and the money?" Her voice pitched higher, keened by anticipation.

Six men, he thought, down there on the bottom of the lake in a black car, driving on through eternity. Five bank robbers and one double-crossing . . . He was certain Phil had tried for him with the knife!

"We found the money," he said. "It's tied to the line."

"Phil," she said, "he hasn't come up. Why—why hasn't he come up, Marty. . . .?"

A sudden burst of light struck

them the force of a physical blow. Oars clanked in oarlocks and then a voice, not really familiar, yet readily identifiable, boomed, "Hold it just like you are! This is the police!"

The light drew nearer and a boat came alongside the skiff. There were three men in it, Captain Cleary, Sergeant Holman, and a man in diving gear.

"We figured it right, Holman," Cleary said.

Marty was pulled out of the water and deposited in the bottom of the boat, completely dazed now by the rapid sequence of unexpected events. "How . . . what . . . that was you a while ago?"

"That was us. We followed you and we had to say something when you stopped and heard our motor."

"Want me to go down now, Cap'n?" the diver asked.

"The other one ought to be up in a minute. We'll wait for him."

"But . . . *how*?" Marty insisted.

"It started that day Holman spotted the diving stuff in your car. When no trace of the bandits turned up we got to thinking something might have happened to

them. But it would have been impossible to search the whole shoreline of the lake. Then we remembered you guys coming into the station the morning of the bank job and leaving right after you heard about the robbery. We got to doing some checking. It wasn't hard to find out you were both in financial trouble, and that you'd both enrolled in a diving course. We decided just to keep an eye on you. If we brought you in for questioning it might have spooked you."

Marty glanced over at Francine in the other boat. "Didn't I tell you—*both* of you—that we should tell the cops what we saw?"

"Where's that pal of yours?" Holman asked. "How come he ain't up yet?"

Marty sighed and gazed up at the flickering stars. Such complications, such absolutely fantastic complications. Who would ever have thought that he, Marty Pollard, would ever have gotten himself into such a . . .

"Maybe you'd better send down, Captain," he said. "I think Phil is going to need some help."



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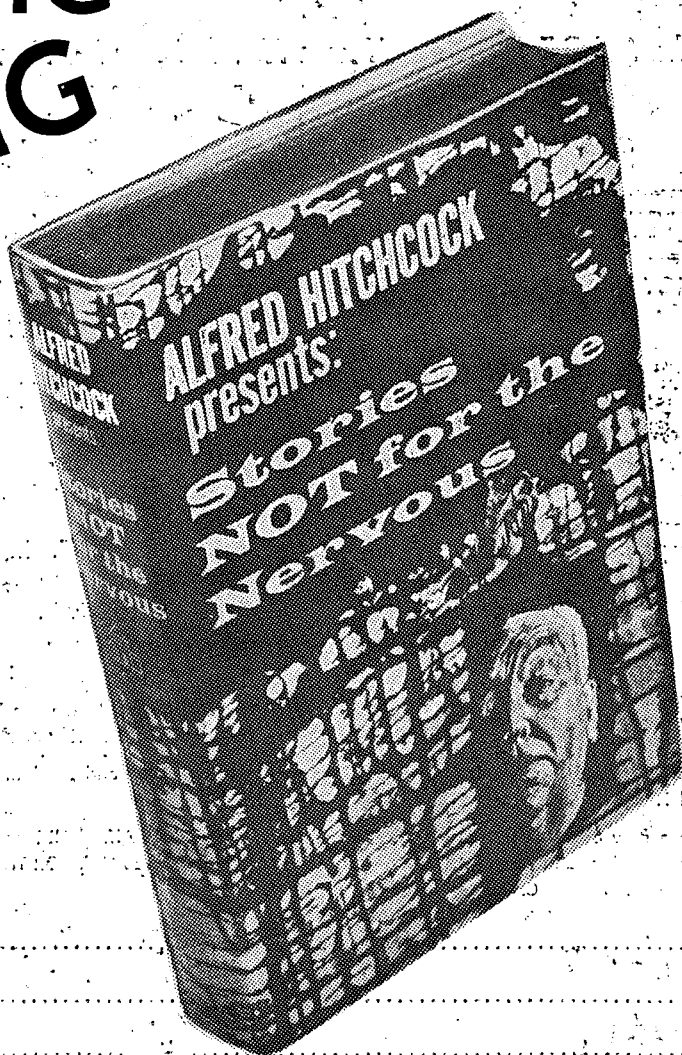
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